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NOVELS**

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by Art Cleveland

LOST RANGE

by Will

Cotton



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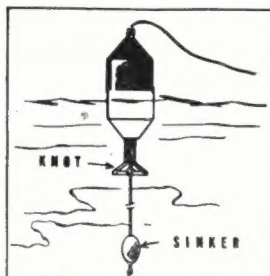
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★ — **ACTION-PACKED** — ★ **WESTERN**

VOL. 3

MAY, 1957

NO. 6

Two Tophand Novels

GUNSMOKE CITY Art Cleveland 6

Mayor Sharky ran Gunsmoke City, and his management was as cunning as it was lawless. But there was one detail for which he couldn't be prepared—morale. Right now, the town was demoralized . . . but when a man like Lance Wallace came along, giving heart to the citizens, the mere weight of numbers could overbalance Sharky's gunmen . . .

LOST RANGE Will Cotton 42

He was Jim Lavery, branded as a killer, a maverick, and the Brants were the only people who had ever made him feel he belonged. But now old Brant was being thrown off his spread, and there was no one to turn to for help — the law was in on the deal. And what could Lavery trust to but his guns, against overwhelming odds?

Short Stories and Features

A SLANT ON JESSE JAMES Carl Breihan 72 How did the other members of the gang look upon Jesse?

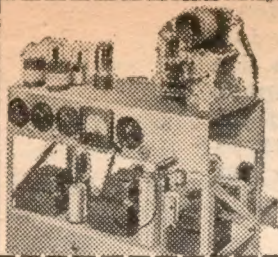
ON THE CHISHOLM TRAIL (verse feature) Edward Garner 73 By romance spurned, to crime he turned . . .

HIS CALLING CARD HAD CLAWS ON IT Harold Gluck 74 Yellowstone Kelly just didn't have a good publicity agent!

KILLER'S PURSE A. A. Baker 75 Herb Martin became a one-man execution squad when his pa was killed!

ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, Editor

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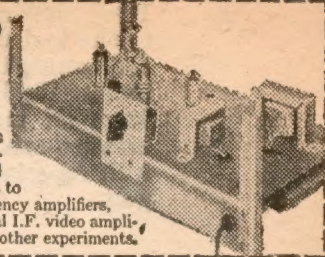


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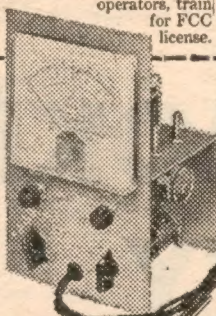
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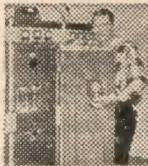
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Ford Sharky had his lawless regime organized down to the last detail, but one item he couldn't allow for. He couldn't plan against the coming of a man like Lance Wallace, and the influence Wallace would have on men who needed only a leader to fight crookedness. And a man like Wallace was hard to kill, especially when he had brains as well as a fast gun.

GUNSMOKE CITY

Novel of Satan's Town

by ART CLEVELAND

GUNSMOKE CITY, in the southern corner of Nevada, had grown up on Broken J Range. In a few weeks after the discovery of gold, it grew from a sleepy village to a boom-town of canvas and mud huts, timbered houses and false-fronted double-storey stores and hotels, a town of robbery and rape and murder, with an average of one killing every twenty-four hours.

The stage ran through twice daily, from Phoenix to Salt Lake City and back to Phoenix, and riders came from the ranges to join the frantic diggers in the search for gold, while thieves murdered for gold, gamblers staked their lives for gold, and men fought for gold.

Lance Wallace, in town the hour since the stage had arrived, walked slowly along the street looking curiously at the buildings. He was dressed as an Easterner, with jacket and tight pants and gold watch-chain;

but there was something in his bearing, in the iron-jawed face and sun-tanned skin that suggested he was no greenhorn from the East. His legs were bowed from the constant association of a horse, and his eyes were used to squinting against the sun.

He noticed Jed's Eatinghouse on the far side of the street, next to the vacant Sheriff's office. He drew level with *Mick's Saloon*, and suddenly the door flew open and a carrot-headed youth sailed out on to the sidewalk. A second later, a .45 revolver came after him.

Lance stopped and gazed down at him. "Been having one too many, Ginger?"

"Go to hell," the youth said. "I don't drink."

"Maybe you've been picking a fight?"

"Yeh." The boy picked himself up and began brushing his clothes with



Ruth tried to help the wounded man to a safe place . . .

his hands. He was about sixteen, lean and freckled.

Lance picked up the gun and handed it to him. "Better luck next time."

"Yeh. Only it's Duggin Clay that'll need the luck. I reckon you're a stranger here, Mister, but you'll soon learn to pick out Duggin Clay. Fella that looks like a coyote."

"I'm a stranger." Lance nodded slowly. "I'm looking for a place to buy a horse, kid. Maybe you could help me."

"Sure." Ginger thrust his revolver into its holster. "What sort of hoss?"

"Any sort—so long as it's good."

"We got the finest cayuses in Nevada out at the Broken J. My father's sister breeds 'em. Part Morgan.

Best all round hosses in the country."

"We'll have a look at 'em, kid."

Ginger nodded. "I'll get you a cayuse to ride over on. Jed's stables—behind the eating-house."

They went over to the stables. Jed was agent for Phoenix stage coaches and kept a lot of horses. He was bald and paunchy, wore a white apron with a short double-barrelled .41 deringer strapped on the outside of it.

"Gonna ride like that?"

"I reckon so."

"Pity them damn creases in your pants."

Lance grinned, mounted the horse, and rode alongside Ginger, leaving the town and going across the plain. He noticed the range was good. Would

carry a lot of stock. Ginger was silent until they neared the double gates of the ranch house, where the neat white buildings grouped themselves in an arc.

"What's your handle Mister?"

"Wallace. Lance Wallace."

"My sister's boss around here. Ruth Pinewood." He explained unnecessarily, "I'm her brother."

Ruth Pinewood was a surprise to Lance. She seemed hardly to be older than her brother, and she was remarkably pretty. Her hair was darker than Ginger's, and her pale skin was free of freckles. She was dressed in black, and her face looked intensely white.

"Gent wants to buy a hoss," Ginger said. "Lance Wallace."

"Howdy, Miss Pinewood."

She was suddenly ill at ease. "Oh, we—we never really sell our horses. We like to keep them. Really, they aren't for sale at all, and—"

"Hey!" Ginger said. "You were saying this morning that we just got to sell 'em."

"I know," she said. She tried to speak more calmly. "Things have been going very badly," she explained. "The cattle are disappearing, being rustled, and—well, I know we'll have to sell some of the horses, but I hate doing it, I can't bring myself to do it. Father was so proud of them. He loved them. So do I."

"Sure. I understand, Miss." Lance's face was impassive. "I'll find one in Gunsmoke City."

He was turning to go. She made up her mind suddenly. "No. Don't go. I'll sell you a horse. I'm being foolish and sentimental, and I know I'll have to sell some of them. If you'd like to bring them in, boy, Mr. Wallace can have a look at them."

"If you'd rather not, Miss—"

"Please I have to." She watched Ginger go out. "Everything's in a bad way. I can't get riders to stay, and I can't trust the ones that have stayed.

I'm losing cattle, I'm losing everything."

"The tide'll turn, Miss."

She shook her head, sadly. "It won't be the way Gunsmoke City is going. It's terrible." She looked up quickly. "You aren't a rider? You aren't looking for a job?"

"Cowpunching for you?"

"Yes. I'll pay you well—as well as I can."

"I'll think it over."

"I'm getting desperate," she said quietly, "My father was killed in Gunsmoke. Murdered. Since then, everything's gone wrong. I'd appreciate it if you'd think in my favor about the job."

THEY WENT outside. Ginger was bringing in a bunch of thirty horses, driving them into a corral. Lance watched them and felt a thrill run along his spine; they were magnificent. He walked slowly to the rails with Ruth Pinewood, then climbed up and sat on the top rail, the horses below him.

Ginger came round on his horse, dismounted, and sat next to him. "There's no better cayuses in the West." Lance nodded slowly. "Maybe you're right, kid."

He watched the horses moving about restlessly, the finest bunch he had ever seen together. Endurance and speed, beauty and intelligence. He watched them silently for ten minutes.

Lance pointed. "That's the fellow for me."

Ruth breathed a sigh of relief. He had picked a horse called Nightway, a black, smaller than most of the others, not quite so beautiful, but extraordinarily fleet and hard.

"You know a good horse," she said. "My father swore by Nightway, but I've always chosen Apollo." She pointed out the horse. Lance smiled.

"Fine and beautiful, but I'm sticking to my choice. If you'll tell me how

much he is, Miss, I'll hit the trail."

She hesitated. "They're...rather expensive. Two hundred and fifty dollars."

Lance Wallace didn't even blink. He took a roll of notes from his pocket, peeled off three hundred dollars, and passed them to her. She went into the house for change. Ginger went into the corral and roped the black. The girl returned as Lance mounted.

"You'll like Nightway, and please remember about that job if ever you want it."

"Sure, Miss Pinewood. I'm not likely to forget."

Lance rode back to Gunsmoke City and returned the hired horse to Jed. Jed looked at the one Lance had bought.

"A Pinewood bronc, ain't it?"

"Yep."

"Things must be gettin' doggone tough if Miss Ruth has to sell 'em. The old man was crazy about hosses."

Lance led Nightway into the stable and quarter-filled a box with grain. "Pinewood got himself killed, I heard. Gunfight?"

"Nobody's sure. Duggin Clay killed him. Duggin's a bad hombre, Mister. If you aim to keep out of trouble, dodge that Clay fella."

"Sure will." Lance came out of the stable. "I'm getting hungry, Jed. Grub on?"

"On twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, eggs two days a week. This ain't one of 'em. Cawfee and ham, fifty cents, with as much cawfee as you want."

Lance went into the eating-house. He was served by a colorless girl who refused to smile. Lance ate his meal silently, then stood up to go. He felt in his pocket as the girl came over.

"Fifty cents," she said.

"Fifty for you, kid. Any chance of getting a bed in this town?"

"You might try *Mick's Saloon*; no foot no peace, but plenty of noise. If

you can't get a room, come back here. Thanks for the fifty."

LANCE WENT across the road. *Mick's Saloon* had been slapped up to cope with the rush of gold-seekers. It had a long bar, a dozen tables and a stage. Ten men stood at the bar when Lance went in, and about a dozen sat at the tables playing cards. Mick watched Lance approach.

"Name it," he said.

"Telmann's."

"Never heard of it."

"All right, then, you name it."

Mick grinned and poured a drink. Lance slid a dollar on to the bar, took the drink and looked around him. The men standing were mostly cowpokes, their chaps covered with dust, their Stetsons pushed back on their heads. Each one had a gunbelt sagging over the right hip—all except one of them, and that one had two guns.

"Who's the twin-gun fella?" Lance asked Mick.

"Duggin Clay."

Lance studied him. Clay was tall and hawk-eyed. He had bloodless lips, and his eyes were a piercing black. The fingers of his hand never seemed to straighten, but were always slightly clawed, as though eager for the grip of a .45.

"Who's Sheriff of this place?"

"The place ain't got a Sheriff. Last three got plumb into the road of some lead, an' nobody don't seem to want to be the fourth. You want the job, Stranger?"

"Not me."

"Ford Sharky's mayor. I guess he's boss around here."

Lance nodded. "Any chance of a bed here, Mick?"

"No more chance of you gettin' a bed here than there is of Duggin Clay goin' to heaven." Mick lowered his voice. "Only don't say I said so. See Julie Brown over at Jed's place. Mebbe she's got a room."

There was a shot outside, followed by the sound of galloping hooves. The men stopped playing cards for a second, then continued. Duggin Clay didn't even move. Lance Wallace went to the door and saw a man lying in the middle of the road. His left foot was gently twitching. Then it became still. Nobody approached the dead man.

Lance turned around. "Doesn't anybody do anything when a fella gets plugged in this town?"

Clay stared at him. "Not when it ain't their business, Stranger. We got no Sheriff, but we hev a damn fine undertaker."

"Murder doesn't count?"

Duggin Clay watched him steadily.

"This is a wild town, fella. If you don't like it, you can sure pass along to another climate. There's gold here, an' there's smokin' guns, an any hombre's scared of 'em can get out."

"It's not a case of fear, it's a case of justice," Lance said softly. "Every man's entitled to a chance. I even heard that Pinewood had no chance."

Clay stiffened. He drew his gun, but he drew it slowly, and he stood facing Wallace, his eyes narrowed dangerously. "You were sayin'?" he whispered.

"I reckon you herd me, Clay. You can shoot me. I'm not carrying a gun, so you can plug me without any trouble, if that's the way you want it—if it's your way, Mister. It's up to you."

Clay returned his gun to his holster, but his eyes never left Lance. Then he turned slowly to the bar and slapped a coin down.

HE WENT back to Jed's place. The girl told him he could have a room at her mother's place, although her mother didn't like it because the men she'd had there had been noisy and troublesome, and had cleared out without paying.

Lance went along to the house, car-

rying his pack. He paid his board in advance to a little old lady who walked with such a bad stoop she was nearly doubled up. She looked at Lance for long time before she spoke. "You look a gentleman, young man."

"I won't cause trouble, ma'am."

"I don't know what the place is coming to. What Gunsmoke City needs is a marshal with the strength to stop the killings. The place is full of outlaws and thieves. Pinewood was the last strong man we had."

"He was killed in a gunfight, ma'am?"

"He was murdered!" she snapped. Her eyes softened. "I could tell you something about Alfred Pinewood. But I'm not telling you, young man, I'm not telling you. I've told nobody in twenty years." She glared at him. "Well, your room's at the end of the passage."

It was a little room containing a bed and chest, with a rather wobbly chair next to the bed, but the room was extraordinarily clean and the bed had sheets. Lance Wallace dropped his bag. He heard the woman coming along the passage. She tapped on his door.

"Do you mind taking your boots off before you get to bed?"

Lance grinned. "Why, sure, ma'am. I always do."

"Well, then," she snapped, "you're one of the few that does"

Lance carefully removed his boots and then lay on top of the bed. He slept for an hour, then changed into his chaps and woolen shirt and buckled a gunbelt to his waist. A gun sagged low on each hip. He laced the bottoms of the holsters to his chaps, and after that his fingers caressed the worn butts of his forty-fives. He felt dressed again.

He went down to Jed's place. Julie was still serving, but now Jed and a chinless boy helped her. She worked her way towards Lance's table.

"Get the room?"

"Yes, Julie. Thanks."

"My mother's a very nice woman, really." She looked away "If you want beef tonight, it's on."

"I'll have beef." Lance looked up at her. "Julie, why don't you ever smile?"

"There's nothing to smile about... if you knew."

The room was full and noisy. Jed was perspiring as he served, his deringer still strapped over his apron. He carried seven plates at once and spilled not a single drop of gravy. Lance wondered how he would reach his gun in a hurry if he wanted it.

Julie came back and put a plate in front of him. "Good beef," she said tonelessly. "Broken J." She coughed. "We buy it from Rupe Hendry. Maybe Rupe buys it from Pinewoods, maybe he doesn't. You can work that out."

Lance stared at her. "Why are you telling me this?"

Her eyes were steady. "Gunsmoke City needs a strong man. I've got a hunch you're it!"

SHE WENT away. Lance began his meal while his eyes constantly roved over the men in the room. He saw Duggin Clay sitting with three other men. He saw Duggin grip Julie's hand and run his fingers up her bare arm. The girl stood stock still. Lance thought of Gunsmoke's record of killings and wondered how much Duggin Clay contributed to it.

Further along the room he saw Matt Spinor, Panhandle bad man with a price on his head. Spinor had fat jowls and smouldering eyes, and he kept his Stetson on while he wolfed his food.

Lance finished, paid Julie, then went across to *Mick's*. He stood against the bar, rolling a cigaret, while Mick talked with some men. Lance overheard the conversation. The southbound coach had been held up and robbed, its driver shot.

"Something's sure gotta be done," Mick said, looking at Lance.

"Right, Mick. But what?"

Mick shook his head. "That's for you fellers to decide."

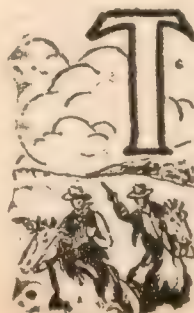
The bar was filling rapidly now. Men piled coins on to the tables and began playing cards, and a drunken miner got up to the empty stage and began singing. Nobody took any notice of him. Duggin came through the doors, swinging them aside with his shoulder. He saw Lance immediately, noticed that he was armed, and then turned to the bar. A man climbed over the counter to help Mick.

The noise increased as the smoke thickened. Lance was watching the door when it opened again, and Ginger Pinewood stood just inside. Duggin Clay saw him at the same instant. Duggin's gun flashed out and covered the boy, and both were motionless for a moment.

Then Duggin stepped forward and removed Ginger's gun. He thrust it down his belt, put his own .45 back into its holster, and was drawing back his clenched fist to strike when Lance Wallace's voice rang out.

"Duggin! Leave the kid alone." Duggin turned slowly, his eyes narrowed to slits, and he found himself looking along the barrel of a .45 revolver.

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THE ROOM became ominously silent. Lance hadn't spoken loudly, but his voice had held the cut of a whip, and the men turned to watch the man who dared face Duggin Clay.

Clay was crouching, squinting, his clawed hands up at

the sides of his waist. Then he stood up straight, his bloodless lips curling into a sneer. "Sure, you've got the drop."

"I'm putting my gun away in a minute, Clay," Lance said softly. "Before I do it, I'm telling you to leave that kid alone, now and all times. You killed his father, probably murdered him, and the kid's sore. Leave him alone, Duggin."

"Talkin' won't save *you*, stranger," Duggin said. "Put your iron away an' give me an even break."

"The hell. I don't want to fight you."

"You're goin' too, sonny, if you like it or not. Either kill me now, or take what's comin' to you when I've got an even break."

Ginger was motionless against the wall. The drinkers began shuffling away from the ends of the bar, leaving a clear space behind each man. Mick, worried about the possible damage, leaned over the bar.

"Gents," he pleaded. "Outside, gents. Outside please, gents. Gents... gents..."

Neither man took the slightest notice of him. They stared at each other. Duggin grinned without humor. "Gwan, put your iron away."

"I don't want to kill you, Clay."

"Don't you worry none about that. It ain't me headin' for the angels. You owe me an even break, fella."

Wallace slowly began to lower his gun, and every man in the room thought he was signing his death warrant. The tension mounted with the slow, downward movement of his gun. Nobody seemed to breathe. Then the gun was back in its holster. A couple of men crawled under the tables; most flattened themselves against the walls. The two men stood ten paces apart, Duggin Clay crouched forward a little, balanced on the balls of his feet.

Lance was easy and relaxed. "Reach when you reckon you've got a chance, Clay."

"I'm aimin' to let you start, four-flusher."

Lance smiled. "You'll never pull a gun with your right hand again, Clay. Not after today. You won't have much hand to drag with."

"Reach!"

Lance Wallace reached, yet nobody in the room could swear they saw him move. There was no apparent movement; yet his Colt was in his hand, belching, and Duggin Clay stood with his own hand smashed and dripping blood, half way to the holster. Duggin gripped his right wrist, his mouth sagging open with astonishment.

"I'm leaving you alive for somebody else to kill, Clay."

"By Gawd," Clay whispered.

"Better get that hand fixed up, cowboy," Wallace advised him. "If you stand there much longer you'll bleed to death."

Duggin turned suddenly and went out. Lance swivelled to face the men at the back of the room, his .45 still in his hand, his eyes hard and steady. "Any other hombres eager to have a funeral can step right forward and say so now."

Nobody moved. Lance put his gun away and turned back to the bar, a slight grin on his face. He nodded to Ginger Pinewood.

The boy came across slowly. "Gee, Lance, I never seen a feller shoot like that before."

"I'll show you the secret some time, kid."

"That a promise?"

"Sure." Lance nodded. "I guess it's a promise. What are you doing here, kid?"

Mick poured Ginger a flavored drink without being asked for it. Lance paid. The boy nodded his thanks. "I come every night to see if any new riders have come in an' maybe want a job ridin' herd. There's plenty of cowpunchers, but none of 'em wants to punch cows."

"Not when there's gold around."

THE BAR began returning to normal. The players returned to their interrupted cards, and groups sauntered together to talk, but still a lot of them kept glancing curiously at the man who had beaten Duggin Clay to the draw. Lance ignored them. Ginger wandered off to look for cowpokes in search of work. There weren't any.

Lance felt somebody touch his arm. He turned to look at a man with a florid face and a snow white moustache. The man wore a cream silk shirt with pearl buttons.

"I'm glad you didn't kill Clay," he said. "Damned glad, sir, damned glad."

"Clay's no help as a citizen of Gunsmoke City," Wallace pointed out dryly. "I guess he wouldn't be missed too much."

"Nevertheless, I'm glad you refrained from killing him, for it would have been my unpleasant duty, sir, to have taken steps to have you arrested and hanged for murder."

"That so?"

"That is so. Ford Sharky is my name, sir, and I am the mayor of Gunsmoke City, appointed by the Governor of Nevada."

Lance looked at him blandly. So this was Ford Sharky, pompous and red and important. He had mild eyes that never focused long in one place, and blue veins on his temples. Lance Wallace sipped his drink slowly. "I've met lots of mayors between Puebla and Butte, good ones and bad ones—but I've never met one as crooked, weak and dirty as you are, Sharky. You should be strapped on to a horse and run out of town."

Some men who had heard him stopped talking to listen. Ford Sharky began to blow himself up until his cheeks were swollen and nearly purple. He quivered with rage.

"Sir!" he exploded, "I'll have you

arrested. I'll have you put in jail for contempt. I was appointed by the Governor, sir. I do my duty as I see it, to the best of my ability. Sir—"

"What was your duty when Duggin Clay killed Alfred Pinewood?"

"That was Pinewood's own doing," Sharky blustered. "Picked a fight. Drew his gun first."

"Who said so?"

"Why, sir; his gun was in his hand. And Clay said so."

"And you took Clay's word for it. If that's doing your duty, you're worse than I first thought."

"Sir! I'll have—"

"Shut up!" Lance said curtly. "Don't pretend you're doing your duty while one man's losing his life every day of the week in Gunsmoke City; while stages are being held up; while cattle are being rustled from the range; while you haven't got a Sheriff or Marshal; while wanted outlaws wander through the town as they like. You're crooked, Sharky, and everyone in town knows you're crooked."

"Sir! Sir!" Ford Sharky couldn't get his breath. Lance finished his drink and put down the empty glass.

"If you're goin' to have me arrested, Mr. Mayor, you'd sure better make the charge a good one, because I'll be gunning for you and there's one time I never make a mistake. Never. That's when I'm facing a coyote with a gun in my hand."

He nodded curtly and went toward the swing doors. Sharky's voice yelled after him.

"I'll appoint a Sheriff," he screamed. "I'll appoint a Sheriff in this city, and you'll hang, sir, you'll hang. I was appointed by the Governor of Nevada—"

LANCE WENT out into the street. The lights of the town were before him, spread in arc where once Broken J beef had roamed undisturbed, and the darkness hid the red gashes in

the earth where goldseeks had turned over the soil. He turned along the sidewalk, stopping when he saw Ginger Pinewood coming towards him. "Any luck, kid?"

"Nope." Ginger's tone was despairing. "There ain't anyone in town that's willing to punch cows. I'll look in Jed's place next, but I sure ain't optimistic."

Lance rolled a cigaret in the darkness. "I'll ride over to the range with you, kid. Maybe I'll take that job your sister was talkin' about."

"Gee! That's fine. Ruth'll be pleased."

"I'll have to make certain conditions." Lance lit his smoke. "Look round in Jed's and stay there till I come. We'll ride out together."

He went to Brown's house, picked up some of his gear, and knocked on Mrs. Brown's door. She came out, bent over with rheumatism.

"Well?" she snapped.

"I've taken on a job riding for the Broken J," he told her. "But I'd be mighty obliged if you'd let me keep the room. I'll sure keep the rent up to date."

She moved, letting the lamp light shine on to his face, and she peered up at him. "Herding Pinewood's cows, eh?" She stared at him intently. "I think you're honest. Young man, for some reason I think you're honest. I could tell you something about Alfred Pinewood, but I won't."

"Could I keep the room, ma'am?"

"What for?" she snapped. "You can only sleep one place at a time."

"Maybe I'll be in town now and then to conduct some business," he said quietly. "Maybe Duggin Clay'll want to see me. I sort of shot Duggin's fingers off. Maybe Mayor Sharky'll want to see me. I sort of told Ford Sharky he didn't rank very high as a mayor, as mayors go. I'd like to oblige those gents if they want to see me."

Her eyes were bright. "Son," she said earnestly, "any time you want that room it's yours."

"Thanks, ma'am."

He saddled Nightway before he went into Jed's place. Ginger had obviously been telling Julie about his brush with Duggin Clay, for her eyes never left him as he entered, and for the first time he saw a smile touch her pale lips. The smile somehow reminded him of Ruth Pinewood.

"Why didn't you kill Clay?" she asked simply.

"Well, Miss Julie, I reckon I had no reason to kill him."

"I can give you a hundred reasons."

"Sure, but your reasons aren't my reasons."

She went closer to him. "Kill him before he kills Ginger. The boy draws on him every time he sees him. Ginger hasn't got a hope against Duggin."

Ginger was looking down at the floor. Lance looked at him.

"So that's why Duggin kicks you out? Because you try to outdraw and shoot him every time you see him. You're loco."

"He killed my pa."

"Sure. You've got the sand, kid, but you haven't got the speed. You wouldn't be as fast as Clay yet. He's deadly."

"He ain't as slick as you are."

"He's as fast as I am," Lance said slowly, "only he doesn't know it."

They mounted their horses and rode towards the Broken J ranchhouses. Lance stopped twice, listening. Ginger stopped as well, wondering what the other was listening for.

"Cattle on the hoof."

"Rustlers?"

"Sure. You'd hear a long way on a night like this, kid. Where does most of the beef hold out?"

"Away from the town. Ruth thought it would be better to keep them on the far side of the range. I got a hunch

she's wrong, Lance, but we only have eleven riders for durn near two hundred thousand acres."

"Hell's bells! No wonder you're losing cattle."

Lance stopped again, vaguely aware that he could hear movement, but unable to decide where it was coming from. He was motionless for about a minute.

"Reckon we'll detour," he said at last. "There's something going on over there."

Ginger felt a stiffness run up his spine. He hadn't heard a thing, but he put his horse beside Lance's and rode eastwards, and they were stirrup to stirrup for a mile. Then Ginger heard the distinct bellow of a steer on the prod.

"If your beef's supposed to be the other side of the range, kid, we've bumped into rustlers. Feel like a fight?"

Ginger's mouth was dry. "Why, sure."

"Sounds like a small herd—about twenty or thirty. Shouldn't be more than two men. Let's go."

THE RUSTLERS were casual. There were two of them, and they had been rustling Broken J steers for so long, and with so much ease, that they didn't expect trouble.

They saw the flash of fire first, and then heard the roar. Suddenly they dug their spurs into the flanks of their horses, separating as they galloped off. Ginger fired, missing.

Lance grinned and put his gun away. "Take the other one!" he yelled to the boy.

Ginger swerved. Lance set his horse after the rustler heading straight for Gunsmoke City, and he felt the power of the Pinewood stallion beneath him. The rustler turned and fired into the darkness. He spurred his horse again.

Wallace was catching up. Now he dragged his .45 from its holster. He

could dimly see the horse and rider ahead of him. He fired. The outlaw swung in the saddle and shot back. Lance fired again, and suddenly the rustler's horse, a rangy black, slithered forward, somersaulted, and was still. Before the rustler could get into the cover of the dead horse, Lance was beside him.

"Reach!"

The man raised his hands silently.

"Take off your gun-belt," Lance said, "and take it off nice and easy. This Colt of mine starts talking fast if a sudden movement happens."

There was enough light from a quarter moon to see clearly the way the rustler unbuckled his belt. His hands went nowhere near the butt of the revolver so temptingly showing from the holster.

"Drop it!"

The man dropped it. Lance dismounted carefully and went closer to the man so he could see his face. He appeared to be pallid, with a sweeping black moustache and great dark eyebrows. Lance moved back, satisfied he would know him again if he saw him.

"What's your name?"

"Smith."

"Yeh? I reckon I've heard it before. What's your name?"

"Mind your own business."

"I could kill you right here and now," Lance said patiently. "I could plug you where you stand and not answer any questions about it, but I'm not going to. You're going to be tried, fella, and you're going to die to show the citizens of Gunsmoke City that lawlessness just doesn't pay."

"You the Sheriff?"

"Nope."

Lance heard a horse approaching in the darkness. He whistled. A whistle came back out of the night. Ginger rode up. "He got away," he said dimly. "Doggone it, he got away. What are you goin' to do with this one, Lance? String him?"

"No, kid, we'll take him back to the ranch and take him to Gunsmoke in the mornin' for trial."

The rustler couldn't suppress a chuckle. Ginger gaped at his friend, leaning forward to squint through the darkness. He took a deep breath. "You loco, or something? Take him back to Gunsmoke for trial—why, you're crazy. They'll fine him five dollars and let him go."

"Maybe. Maybe not. You'll have to ride double with me, kid, while that rattler has your cayuse."

"Listen, Lance, you can't take him to Gunsmoke City. Sharky's the only hombre that could try him, and Sharky'd sure let him off light. Plug him now. That's the law of the range."

"Sorry, Ginger, I want your cayuse. Cover this hombre while I tie him."

Ginger dragged up his gun, glad of some sort of action. Lance took a rope from the saddle of the dead horse and began to tie up its owner. The rustler was silent.

Ginger led up his horse. The rustler wouldn't budge.

"If you don't help yourself to get up, I'll club you and throw you there," Lance told him. "I mean that, fella; you'd be a lot less trouble asleep. When I lift, jump and lie across this horse, then climb into the saddle. Any funny business and you don't get to the Broken J alive."

Lance heaved and the rustler jumped so that he was lying across the saddle. He scrambled awkwardly, unable to use his hands, until he was astride the horse.

"If you like to make a run for it, go right ahead," Lance said. "The kid will have you covered every step of the way, and Ginger's sure hungry to spill somebody's blood. I reckon he would just as soon have it yours as anybody's."

THEY ARRIVED at the Broken J ranch-house an hour later. They

got the rustler down from the horse and Ginger led the way to a hut on the far side of the clearing. It was single-roomed and windowless, and it was made solidly. Ginger lit a lamp and Lance examined the cabin.

"He won't bust this lock, anyhow," Ginger said.

"I reckon this will do till the morning." He pushed the man in. "You can keep yourself busy for a couple of hours trying to get that rope off, coyote. Sure, it'll come off, but the one that's going round your neck is going to stay until somebody takes it off."

The went out, locking the door. Ginger released both horses in the corral and then went with Lance into the house. Ruth Pinewood was waiting for them. Her eyebrows rose when she saw Lance.

"We got a rustler," Ginger said triumphantly. "Leastwise, Lance did. He's locked in the shed, an' he won't get out, neither. That cabin was built to hold out Indians. There were two of 'em. One got away."

She looked at Lance. "Is that right?" "Sure."

"Was there... a fight?"

"Wasn't what you'd call a fight, Miss Pinewood. I reckon they was so used to walking off with your steers that they got kind of careless about keeping watch."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"I came over to say I'd accept your offer to carry your iron, Miss Ruth," Lance said. "That's if we can make terms."

"I'll pay you as much as I possibly can."

Lance waved his hands. "Sure, but I didn't mean money. Gunsmoke City is a boom-town, a helltown that needs cleaning up. If I can help to clean it up, I'll certainly be glad to—but I won't be able to help if I'm riding range all the time."

"No," she said. "Of course. You

mean you want to be able to go to Gunsmoke whenever you like?"

"As often as I have to."

"Of course. You wouldn't—you wouldn't consider becoming foreman would you? Tom Barron is acting as foreman, but he's getting too old. He's seventy-eight. He's been with us since my father first came here, and he's a fine man, but he's too old for the job, and he knows it."

Lance looked straight at her, seeing the embarrassment in her eyes, and the pain and bewilderment. He saw the courage there, too, and the will to go on fighting.

"If I accept that offer, Miss Ruth, could I do things the way I wanted? Do 'em my way?"

"Yes," she said. "For some reason I trust you."

"Thanks, Miss Ruth. I'm sure grateful for that." He looked at Ginger. "You'll be riding herd as well, kid."

"Sure."

"First thing we'll do is to bring the cattle nearer to the ranch-house. Maybe they'll lose a bit of condition, but you'll at least have something to sell when the time comes to sell. I'll meet the boys in the morning."

Ruth was blushing. "About—about wages."

"We can discuss that when you see how I pan out. Now if you'll tell me where I find the bunkhouse, I'll hit the hay."

LANCE SLEPT soundly that night. Early in the morning he met most of the Broken J riders. He addressed them all, his words curt and to the point. Tom Barron stood beside him, a fine oldtimer, glad to be relieved of the responsibility that was too much to handle.

"Boys," Lance said, "you're doing a good job and a hard one, and I'm not here to promise to make it easier. You all know what Gunsmoke City's like; you know of the killings and the rob-

beries and the rustling, and you know you can't ride the range and let it pass by. The Broken J is right in the thick of it. That means fighting."

He looked over them. Nobody spoke. Lance went on. "You cowpunchers are here because you're loyal—or because you're crooked. I don't know any of you, but if I find any man is on the side of the rustlers, he's goin' to eternity, and he's goin' fast. Those who are loyal to the memory of Alfred Pinewood will have to work and fight—or get out. If any man wants to quit, now is the time to do it."

Not a man moved.

"I'm sure glad to see you've got guts. I want you to round up the cattle and bring the herds nearer home. All of 'em. Night riders will change with day riders every third day. Any questions?"

"Yeh," a voice said. "How long do you reckon eleven men can look after territory as big as the Broken J?"

"As long as it has to be done. I'll get more cowpokes as fast as I can. All right?"

The speaker grinned tiredly. "Sure. Only I've been in the saddle for fifty hours without sleep. I reckon as how I'm gettin' a mite tired."

"Sleep while the boys are rounding up the herds, and remember that Miss Pinewood's grateful for what you boys have done."

When they were gone Lance turned to old Tom Barron. In spite of his age, the man was powerful and upright, with white hair and plenty of it. He had a strong jaw and relentless eyes that summed up a man accurately in an instant. He put out his hand. "You're the man for me, son."

"If I do as well as you've been doing, I won't complain."

"Eh? Too old now, son. But I ain't too old to sit a cayuse, and my eyes ain't so far gone that they can't sight along a rifle. I'm in your hands. Tell me what to do, boy."

"Sure. You can come to Gunsmoke

City with me. Keep near me but not with me. Pretend you don't know me—until the trouble starts. Then it's up to you."

"What's goin' on?"

"Rustler. Caught in the act. Over here."

They went over to the little cabin. Lance took out his gun and unlocked the door, pushing it wide open. The man sat on a bench, blinking in the light.

"Stand up, rustler," Lance said softly, "an' start saying your prayers."

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TOM BARRON rode off before Lance and his prisoner, and was already in town before the others arrived. Lance took his man down the center of the street towards the mayor's office. The rustler, obviously well known, grinned at the people who watched the scene. Lance completely ignored them.

He took the outlaw into Ford Sharky's office. Sharky was sitting at his desk, a bottle of whisky and a glass in front of him. His face reddened and his cheeks blew out when he saw Wallace. "What the devil's the meaning of this?"

"I caught this rattler stealing Broken J cattle. I want to see him tried fair and square, and hanged according to law."

"Young man," the mayor bellowed, "do you think you're running this town? I tell you, sir, that I'm running it. I was appointed by the Governor of Nevada, and I do my duty as I see it, as I see it, sir."

"Listen to me, Mr. Mayor, I could have shot this hombre out on the range, accordin' to the law of the range. But I

didn't. I want to show the people of Gunsmoke City that lawlessness don't pay none. I want *you* to show 'em that."

"This man, sir, is Billy Tenner, and I swear he is no rustler. I swear it myself. The idea of a trial is absurd, absolutely absurd. Furthermore, we have no judge and no Sheriff."

"In that case you'd have to appoint a Sheriff and be the judge yourself."

"I refuse."

Lance Wallace leaned forward. "I'm not here for the fun of it, Sharky. If you refuse to do your duty I'll plug Tenner where he stands, then put a rope on you and drag you the length of the street behind my cayuse, so every citizen in this town can see you where you belong—in the dirt."

Sharky's face paled. "Sir—"

Lance drew his .45. Billy Tenner shivered. "Fer Gawd's sake, Sharky!"

Sharky suddenly made up his mind. "I think perhaps I agree with you, young man. Tenner shall be tried immediately. Take him over to the jail. I shall appoint a deputy."

Half an hour later Mayor Ford Sharky arrived—with about half the population of Gunsmoke City behind him. Walking alongside him was a big red-nosed, hunch-shouldered rider with a squint in his left eye. His face was dark, the darkness of dirt.

Sharky nodded. "This is my Sheriff, Rupe Hendry," he said. "We shall now proceed with the trial which shall be held in *Mick's Saloon* owing to the number of people who wish to attend."

They all went across the road again. Lance caught a glimpse of Tom Barron sauntering with the crowd. He also saw Julie Brown, standing outside Jed's eating-house, her face very pale. They filed into *Mick's Saloon*.

Sharky placed a chair on top of the bar and clambered up to it. A little circle was cleared in front of him. He stamped his heel on the bar. "Order!"

The room gradually became silent.

"Sheriff," the mayor said, "bring

forward the prisoner and charge him."

Hendry led Tenner forward.
"Charged with rustlin' cattle."

"Guilty? Or not guilty?"

"Not guilty." Tenner began rolling a cigaret.

"Tell me what happened, Tenner."

"Sure, Jedge. I was ridin' with me buddy, Tex Kanter, when this hombre rides up and flashes his gun in me face. Sure, we was on Broken J range, and there was steers around; but I point out, Jedge, that we're still on Broken J territory."

"Exactly." Sharky looked at Lance.
"Do you wish to charge this man with trespassing?"

"Rustling's the word," Lance said softly.

"Tell me your part of the story."

LANCE EXPLAINED the facts as they had happened, neither exaggerating nor leaving anything out, and every man in the room knew he was speaking the truth. He finished by saying: "The other hombre got away because it was only a boy chasing him. Tenner wasn't so doggone lucky. He was stealing Broken J steers, and he was caught doing it. The Broken J herds are on the other side of the range."

"Order!" Sharky said. He waited for silence. "It becomes quite evident that there is no proof that this man was stealing cattle. Broken J is free range, like any other range, and a man may cross it. As there is insufficient proof, I must discharge the prisoner."

"Wait!" Lance snapped. He stared narrowly at the pseudo-judge. "Every man in this saloon knows Tenner is guilty, just as every man here knows you're as crooked as any judge ever to let a guilty man go free."

"Order!" Sharky yelled. "Sir! I'll have you up for contempt of court."

"Bah!" Lance sneered. "You're crooked as a corkscrew, Sharky. Gunsmoke City needs cleaning up, and

you're one of the first things got to be kicked out. If—"

"Order!" Sharky bellowed.

"If this rustler goes free your name will spread far across the West as a cheat, a liar and a low coyote."

Ford Sharky's face was purple. The room was silent. Sharky found it difficult to breathe.

"Sheriff," he squeaked. "Arrest that man!"

Lance moved, but he was too late. Rupe Hendry's gun was already pressing into his back; he raised his hands slowly. Hendry took his gun away.

Sharky tried to control his voice. "Sentenced to one month's imprisonment for contempt of court," he said at last. "Sheriff, take the prisoner to jail."

Hendry locked him behind the bars and then sat in the office studying him. There was a light of admiration in Hendry's eyes.

"Doggone it, Stranger, you must have been eating loco weed to try an' get away with that. Mayor Ford Sharky's a big fella in this town."

"Reach, Hendry!" a voice said from the door.

Hendry swivelled to see old Tom Barron standing in the doorway, a Winchester in his hands, and that Winchester was pointing steadily at Hendry's heart.

Hendry raised his hands slowly. "What the hell!"

Barron came forward, took Hendry's gun and passed it through the bars to Lance. Lance grinned his thanks.

"Hoped you'd be along, Tom. I hoped mighty hard you'd be along."

Hendry was grinning. He showed no animosity at all, and seemed to think it a hell of a good joke. He slowly reached for the key and tossed it through the bars to Lance. Lance slipped his arms through and unlocked the door. Hendry stood up without prompting and went into jail as Lance came out.

"We'll meet up again, Wallace," he said.

"Sure. And I wish you were on the right side, Hendry. Now if you'll tell me where you put my shooting-irons, I'll be hitting the trail."

"In the drawer."

Lance retrieved his guns. "So long."

Barron had hitched Lance's horse outside. They mounted. Barron turned fast towards the Broken J, but Lance held out his hand, and Barron looked at him wonderingly. "It all isn't square yet, pardner," he said. "There's a little job to be done."

"Where you goin'?"

"*Mick's Saloon*. I want to see Billy Tenner."

"You're crazy."

Lance turned his pony and rode towards the saloon, but when he dismounted he didn't hitch the reins. He sauntered into *Mick's Saloon*, looking across the smoke-filled room. Nobody appeared to notice him. He saw Tenner leaning against the bar. Lance was pleased to see he was wearing a gun.

"Tenner!"

Tenner looked up, blanching. The noise died down to incredible silence, and then men started diving to safety. Lance waited until they were out of the way before he spoke again.

"The penalty for rustling is sudden death, Tenner. Yours is coming now."

TENNER was ghastly pale. Even from the distance, Lance could see the sweat on his forehead. The muscles of his jaw quivered, and he breathed quickly. Lance Wallace was relaxed. Suddenly Billy Tenner's hand whipped gunwards, but before the gun was clear of the holster, Wallace's .45 was crashing death.

Tenner sprawled on the floor, his fingers bunching as he died. Lance vaulted on his horse and dug in his heels. Tom Barron was already on his way, sitting his horse like a man who had spent years in the saddle. Lance drew level with him. "Take it easy," he

said. "I reckon nothing's going to happen."

"You plug him, boy?"

"Sure."

Back on the Broken J he rode range with Ginger Pinewood, telling him briefly what had happened. Ginger kept glancing at the two guns Lance wore.

"You promised to teach me."

"Oh, sure, kid, sure. Look here, see that rock over there? Well, that's your enemy. Draw and shoot."

The kid hesitated a moment, stiffened his muscles, then jerked his hand down. His Colt roared and a chip flew off the rock. He looked awkwardly at Lance.

"Not bad, kid. But you go wrong the way most other hombres go wrong. You get stiff and jerk your hand down; then everybody knows you're going to shoot. Learn to relax it, kid. Make your muscles loose. Make your hand glide, glide in a way that lets nobody realise you're moving it. Like this."

Lance stopped his horse. His whole body was relaxed as he dismounted and stood clear of the cayuse. His right hand was behind his gun. Slowly, smoothly, it moved forward, and the gesture was so natural, so easy and in keeping with the looseness of the muscles, that Ginger found it hard to realise it was moving at all, yet the gun was there in his hand.

"Gee." Ginger let out a sigh. "Do it again."

"Think of a rattler crawling away in a hurry," Lance said. "You don't actually see him move. There he is, an' there he ain't. Same with dragging a shooting-iron. This way your enemy doesn't realise you've moved until your fingers are just about on your gun, an' then it's too late for him to do much about it. Like this."

He did it slowly, then fast. There looked to be something magical about it, but the forty-five was always there ready. Ginger tried it.

"Slowly," Lance urged. "Speed comes later. Keep at it day after day, keep at it all the time, slow to start with, faster as you learn to keep your muscles relaxed."

Ginger kept practising. They rode herd until the next shift came to take over, singing a lament as they came, and Lance and the boy rode back to the ranch.

Ginger greeted his sister with: "Hey. Lance's teachin' me how to throw a gun. Yes, sir. He's teachin' me to drag an iron like he does himself."

The girl's eyes clouded. "Do you think that's right? The right thing to do?"

"Sure it's right. And the kid's a natural with a revolver. He's a West-erner with a gun, an' he'll never be without it."

THE GIRL nodded sadly. "The rustler—what happened to him?"

"Mayor Sharky dismissed the case, Miss Ruth. Sharky made Rupe Hendry a Sheriff, and jailed me for contempt of court. Tom Barron got me out of court."

"What about—about the rustler?"

"He was wearing his gun next time I saw him, Miss Ruth. He sure won't rustle any more steers."

"I hate killing, but I'm grateful, very grateful for what you've done—what you're doing. I—I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't thank me, Miss." Lance rolled a cigaret. "I'll be hitting the trail for town again tonight and won't be back till the morning."

"Isn't that rather dangerous?"

"Might be," Lance said, "for Rupe Hendry and Ford Sharky."

She suddenly flashed. "I owe Rupe Hendry money, or I'm supposed to," she said quickly. "My father was supposed to. Hendry has the papers to prove it. I didn't know anything about it, but Hendry has the papers... father's signature..."

"Have you paid him anything?"

She nodded. "Four thousand dollars. That's why—why things are so bad here. I paid out all I had."

"Don't pay another cent," Lance told her sternly. "No matter what he says, or what he threatens, don't pay him another cent until I've seen those papers. I've a hunch Hendry's the man behind the rustling—and I'm going to find out."

He rode fast to Gunsmoke City and arrived, as far as he knew, unnoticed. He stabled his horse in Jed's stable, which was in darkness, then he cautiously glanced through the window of the eating-house. Three men were there, one of them Mexican. Lance slipped in and sat at a table facing the door.

Julie came towards him, surprise in her eyes. "You're taking a risk, cowboy."

"I wanted another one of your juicy steaks, Julie."

"No steak—eggs and ham."

"I'll have eggs and ham, and some information. You meet all the people here. I want you to name six cow-pokes you reckon are honest and trustworthy."

"I'll have to think."

She went away, returned a few minutes later with the eggs and ham and coffee. She said nothing. Lance began eating, his eyes constantly watching the door, his right hip clear of the table. When he was nearly finished, Julie came back.

"I can only think of five—Red Wilson, Dan Thompson, Skinny Hale, Jim Stone, Larry Brook."

"That's fine." Lance borrowed her pencil and jotted the names down. "Who's that hombre?"

"I'll give him one. Hey, Mig!"

The Mexican looked up and shuffled over. He had an intelligent brown face and smiling eyes, and he was only about five-feet-three tall. He wore an enormous sombrero.

"Want to earn a dollar, Mig?"

"Si."

"Go over to the saloon and find those five men for me and ask 'em to step over here. You savvy English?"

"Si Si."

"I'll read 'em out to you. See if you can find 'em and ask 'em to step over here. Say it's better pay-dirt than they'll pick up in Gunsmoke City."

The Mexican shuffled out, taking the list with him. Lance had another cup of coffee. The other men left and Julie came to talk to Lance. He looked at her for a long time. She half smiled. It was the second time he had seen her smile.

"When you smile, Julie, you remind me of Ruth Pinewood."

"Ruth is very beautiful."

"You ain't so doggone bad yourself, kid, only you look unhappy all the time, as if something had gone wrong and won't come right again."

There was a silence. Lance said: "Where's Jed?"

"Drunk. He has bouts of it. He's good, really." She looked down at him. "He told me about the trial, and Ford Sharky being judge. We've got a real judge here. Victor Grant."

"Crooked?"

"No. Disgusted."

TWO MEN strolled in, nodded to Lance and came over, Julie went away. A few seconds later two more came in, followed by the Mexican. Lance took a dollar from his pocket.

"Thanks, Mig."

"No find other cowboy, senior."

"Can you ride hard, Mig?"

"Si. Sure, sure."

"Stay around and maybe I'll give you a job." Then Lance turned his attention to the four sitting around his table. Julie came back with four cups and a pot of coffee. Lance Wallace looked at each man in turn. "You are here because you're cowpokes an' because you're honest," he said bluntly. "You came to Gunsmoke City to

dig gold, and I'm willing to bet a dollar to a brass button that you haven't dug any."

They nodded. One of them spoke. "I reckon as how I never will."

"You've got a chance, but it ain't such a hell of a big chance. Well, you know what Gunsmoke City is like. Gunplay, death and robbery, lawlessness and vice. Every decent man knows it sure has to be stopped. That's what I aim to do—stop it, I want your help."

"You can have mine," a rider called Red Wilson said, and the others nodded. "I sure don't mind gunplay, but I hated the idea of getting plugged in the back."

"I'm grateful. But I want you on the Broken J, an' before you start arguing about it, I'm telling you you're wasting your time here, you haven't uncovered any pay dirt, and you ain't doing yourselves or Gunsmoke City any damned good at all."

"Mebbe you'll strike it rich if you keeps on diggin'," one of them pointed out.

"And mebbe you'll bust your heart trying," Lance told him, "I want your help, if you're in town or out on the range; but the Broken J is sure desperate for cowhands. You'll be asked to ride herd and use your guns when the time comes to use 'em."

Red Wilson leaned forward. "You can count on me, pardner. Any man that bucks again Ford Sharky's on the same side as I'm on. I reckon I've seen cold nerve before, but your demonstration beat it to a frazzle. An' you can sure drag a gun, Mister."

"I'll be with you, another time," the second man said. "I got a hunch I'm going to strike paydirt, an' I'm sure goin' to play that hunch. But I'm with you, cowboy. I'll fight any doggone coyote you name, and you're welcome to call on me any time when you need an extry gun." He grinned. "Jest call on Sam Stone."

"Mighty grateful."

"Me for the open range," the third said.

The fourth nodded. "Mebbe you're right, pardners. Diggin' fer gold that ain't there sure gets discouragin' after a while. I reckon I'd like to feel a cayuse under me. Broken J. Ain't that the place they breed those fancy broncs?"

"Yep."

"That's my home. The back of a cayuse. Yeh. Let me dig up my saddle, and I'll be right along."

Lance told them to go over the next morning. He spoke to the Mexican, engaged him, and then left the eating-house. He went to Mrs. Brown's house.

The old lady met him. "Well," she snapped, "been killin' any more men?"

"No, ma'am. I'm peaceful like."

"You did a good job, young man. You did a good jor for the town and for Ruth Pinewood."

Lance went to his room wondering why the thought of Ruth Pinewood disturbed him.

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AFTER RESTING for a couple of hours, during which he thought over the whole business from every angle, Lance Wallace knocked on Mrs. Brown's door. She came out with apparent irritation.

"Well, young man, what is it now?"

"I thought maybe you could tell me where Rupe Hendry hangs out, ma'am. It appears that Miss Pinewood owes Hendry some money, and I sure want to find out why?"

"Ruth owe money? Never! Nor did her pa. Hendry lives next to the blacksmith's shop, but he won't be home

now. He'll be drinking over at the saloon."

"Thanks, ma'am."

The street was dark. Lance walked briskly towards Hendry's place, passed it, and came back again. It was timbered, one of the better houses in the town, and there was a passage running along the side of it, next to the Smith's. Lance slipped along it, hoping he was unseen.

He went right round the house, as silent as a cat, until he found the back door, which was unlocked. He went in, closing the door behind him, and struck a match. He was in the kitchen. The next room was a bedroom, fortunately empty, but the room opposite was obviously a combined study and office. Lance risked lighting the lamp after pulling down the blinds, and then began to search.

A writing desk was in the centre of the room. He opened the drawers one at a time, examining every paper in them. There were many personal letters and a few stock records, but nothing concerning Broken J steers. Lance put everything back where he had found it and slid the drawers home.

The rest of the furniture consisted of two chairs, a bookshelf, and another small table, and he felt his search was going to be fruitless. The table had a drawer in the centre of it, but it contained nothing but boxes of .45 bullets. Then Lance looked along the bookshelf.

There was an odd collection of junk on the shelf, including books that Hendry obviously hadn't read and probably would never read, but the thought of it didn't even bring a smile to Lance's lips. His attention was attracted by a bundle of papers bound together by a wire clip. He took the bundle down and started going through the papers. Most papers dealt with the recent sale of stock, which probably meant Pinewood stock. Then he found what he wanted.

It was a loan agreement stating that Alfred Pinewood had borrowed the sum of ten thousand dollars from Rupe Hendry, which same was to be paid back within two years, interest three per cent. It was signed by Alfred Pinewood, Rupe Hendry, and witnessed by Duggin Clay. Lance was sure that it was a fake. Pinewood would never have had anything to do with Clay, that was certain.

Lance read it again, then ripped the sheet out and put it into his shirt pocket. He briefly examined the rest of the papers and went over to the shelf to return the file. Suddenly the hair pricked the back of his neck as a voice came from the doorway. "Reach for the sky, Wallace." It was Hendry's voice.

Lance raised his hands immediately and turned slowly. Hendry was standing just inside the room, his .45 in his hand. There was a slight smile of admiration on his lips. "Howdy." I looked in for a chat, Hendry, but as you weren't here I decided to wait."

"You're a liar," Hendry said without malice. "I'll have three guesses what you were lookin' for, an' I'll guess right each time."

Hendry came further into the room. He kept his gun aimed steadily at Lance while he reached for the shelf of manuscripts. Lance was looking for a chance, but Hendry felt along the shelf and kept his eyes on Lance. He took down the papers and thumbed through them, flicking his eyes down occasionally for a fraction of a second, not long enough for Lance to make a movement.

"I guess I was right the first time," he said. "The agreement with Alfred Pinewood."

"Which is a fraud, Hendry."

"How can it be a fraud with Pinewood's signature on it?"

"If it is Pinewood's signature," Lance said. "Which it ain't."

"You'd have a hell of a job provin' that, cowboy. I reckon I'll have it

back. I regard it kind of highly."

Lance hesitated only a second, then his fingers went to his shirt pocket. His body was relaxed, the muscles loose. He pulled the agreement from his pocket and, though he seemed not to move, his fist was rocketing for Hendry's face. There was a *Phwunk!* as he hit Hendry's jaw, and the man sagged. Lance caught him and lowered him gently. He took Hendry's gun and placed it on the table, and then, with the agreement back in his pocket, he sauntered out of the house and along the street.

HE WENT back to his room, remembering to remove his boots before he got into bed, and was asleep before Rupe Hendry had returned to consciousness. He rose before dawn, well pleased with the evening's work. In the morning he went openly to Jed's for breakfast. Julie wasn't there, but Jed himself was on the job. Jed stared at him.

"You loco, fella?" He swallowed. "Why, durn it, half the town's gunnin' for you. Wallace an' you come into this doggone place like you owned the world."

"I was hungry," Lance said simply.

After breakfast, Lance Wallace saddled Nightway and hit the trail for the ranch. He saw four riders ahead of him, caught up with them, and found they were the new Broken J cowpokes, including the Mexican. They were singing lustily, glad to be back in the saddle after weeks of futile digging. Even the Mexican sang. They rode as a party to the ranch-house. Ruth came out.

"New outfit," Lance said briefly. He gave their names to the lady boss and then showed them to the bunk-house.

Ginger met them. They ragged him. He took it goodnaturedly and later, when he was alone with Lance, he displayed his ability to draw his forty-five

smoothly and easily. Lance Wallace was impressed. The kid was good, having already mastered the hardest part—that of relaxing the muscles.

They rode out on to the range together, relieving the two men who rode towards home with the report, "All quiet."

BACK IN Gunsmoke City, Ford Sharky invited Rupe Hendry and Duggin Clay into his office. Hendry had a bruise on the side of his jaw. Clay had his right arm in a sling, his hand bandaged. Sharky wasn't so pompous with his colleagues, although he still spoke in the same fashion.

"Gentlemen, we must do something. This man, this impudent cowhand, is becoming a dangerous nuisance."

"Yep," Rupe Hendry nodded his head. "I reckon so, too. He busted into my house last night and stole a valuable paper. He also damn near busted my jaw."

"What the hell are you squawkin' about?" Duggin snarled. "He shot off two of my fingers."

"Clearly, we must do something." Sharky cleared his throat. "I would suggest appointing a Town Marshal—Matt Spinor, for instance—and framing Wallace for murder."

"With you judge?" Duggin sneered. "Have you any objections to me being judge?"

"Nope." Duggin tried to roll a cigarette with his left hand. "Nope, pardner, but every other doggone citizen in town objects. They're likin' that fella, Wallace. People are beginning to back him an' stand behind him. There's only one way to handle hombres like him."

"Go on," Sharky said irritably.

Duggin looked surprised. "With a forty-five, for sure."

"You've tried that," Hendry snapped, "an' you did no more good than to loosen off a couple of fingers that weren't quick enough on the draw. Sure, a Colt's the answer, but where's

the fella who can work a Colt fast enough to supply it?"

"You," Sharky growled.

"Yeh?" Hendry leaned forward. "I can shoot fast, Mister, an' I can shoot straight. But I ain't a fancy gunman that can make a forty-five move without touchin' it."

"I'll do it," Duggin snarled.

"Doggone you for an idiot, Clay; you'll finish with no hands at all."

Clay was vicious. "I'll beat him, next time," he snapped. "I owe it to the coyote. No man can wing me and live after it. I'll kill Lance Wallace as sure as I'm sitting here."

"You really believe you can?" Sharky was doubtful.

Duggin nodded slowly. "Yep. Wallace's number's up."

Sharky leaned back. "Good. But I'll still go ahead with my plan. I'll appoint Matt Spinor as Marshal; and if you can't shoot Wallace, then I'll hang him."

MORE PEOPLE were coming to Gunsmoke City. Now the men were bringing their families. One of them opened a butcher's emporium and sent a notice round stating the fact.

Rupe Hendry offered to supply the beef. "Prime quality, cheap, regular supply."

The butcher accepted. Three days later Lance walked into the shop, looked at the newcomer and said: "You're buying stolen beef, Mister."

"Eh?"

"You must be. Broken J owns all the beef around here."

"I'm buyin' it from a fella called Hendry."

"Sure, I know. And Hendry's rustling it from the Broken J. Don't take my word for it, ask any honest man in town—if you can find one."

"I sure will."

"You can still have Broken J beef at a fair price, direct from the range."

"If I find you're right, Stranger, I'll sure be glad to get in touch with the Broken J people." He rubbed his jaw. I'm mighty pleased you told me."

After that, Lance went to *Mick's Saloon*. It was late in the morning, and few people were there. He ordered a drink from Mick. Mick leaned over the bar.

"Duggin Clay's back in town and agunnin' for you."

"Thanks." Lance took his drink over to the table where two cowboys were sitting disconsolately and talking. Lance calmly sat down and nodded to them. "How's the gold coming out of the ground?"

"Hell—what gold? I'm finished, broke, done, an' I haven't seen a speck of gold since I came here two months ago. I'm ready to quit."

"Feel like hitting leather again?"

"Now you're talkin'."

"The Broken J needs men."

"Say," the other man said, "you the fella...sure, you must be the fella who winged Duggin."

"That's right." Lance rolled a cigaret and licked the paper. "If you want to feel a cayuse between your legs again, and work for a boss that knows somethin about cattle, then go over to the ranch. You'll be treated right, with maybe enough excitement in the end to keep you from going stale."

Without waiting for a reply, Lance went back to the bar and slid his empty glass along the surface. He was heading for the door when it swung open and Duggin Clay came in. Both men stopped in their tracks. Clay snarled like an animal. Lance began to relax.

"Second time's my time," Clay said. "Pull when you're ready, Wallace."

"I'm not aiming to kill you, Clay. Why not leave your gun alone? You can't beat me."

Lance's right hand was behind his gun; he was relaxed and loose. His hand didn't appear to be moving, but suddenly his gun was out, firing be-

fore Duggin's was out of the holster, the bullets smacking against Duggin's gun. Duggin drew his hand away as though he thought he had been reaching for a rattlesnake. The percussion of the shots made his thigh go numb.

"Just to show I can beat you, Clay. But I don't want to kill you, fella, because you're reserved for somebody else."

The two cowboys came over from their table. One of them spoke. "You the foreman over on the Broken J?"

"Yeh."

"You can put us both on the payroll right away. When I see shootin' like that I sure like to stick to the hombre doin' it."

"Forty a month and found."

"That's my job, pardner. Gwan, Frankly, hit the trail for the open range."

LANCE LEFT the saloon for his room in Mrs. Brown's house. He saw the woman and brought his rent up to date, arguing with her when she wanted to refuse it. He teased her. "Tell me what you could about Alfred Pinewood—but won't."

"None of your business, young man. Go on. Get to your room and leave me alone."

Lance went. He hadn't been there more than half an hour when his landlady knocked on the door. "There's somebody to see you, young man."

"Send him right in."

"He doesn't come into my house," she said curtly. "He's out in the road, and that's where he stays."

Lance chuckled and buckled on his guns. He went out into the street and looked at the wiry-framed, squint-eyed Matt Spinor, desperado, outlaw, and now town Marshal. He showed Lance his badge by flicking over his shirt-front.

"You've been making a trouble

round here, cowboy. I'm givin' you twelve hours to hit the trail, an' keep on hittin' it until you reach Canada."

"I like Gunsmoke City too much to leave."

"You've got twelve hours."

"I'm not leavin', Marshal."

A little crowd had gathered. Spinor felt the importance of the occasion. A rasp of authority came into his voice, but his eyes remained as expressionless as ever. "I'm warnin' you, cowboy, to hit the trail. Gunsmoke City ain't quite big enough with a coyote like you in it. If you ain't out by this time tonight you'll sure pay a heavy price."

Lance smiled mercilessly. "I want you to give Sharky a message, Marshal; I want you to tell him not to employ rats to do his dirty work, and I'm going to teach you not to do it."

Lance's gun was suddenly out of its holster. "Take your gun out and drop it. And be careful how you do it."

Still Spinor's eyes were devoid of expression. He pulled out his .45 with his fingertips and dropped it to the ground. Lance felt to see if he carried an armpit holster, but there was none there. He glanced at the gathering crowd, noticed one of the cowpokes from the saloon, and kicked the gun towards him. Then he tossed his own guns across and faced Spinor.

"I'm going to give you a message to take back to Ford Sharky. Not one he'll listen to, but one he'll see!"

Spinor was waiting. The spectators formed a circle, and Ford Sharky, his normally red face pale, watched from his window. Lance approached his opponent.

"I'll kill you, boy," Spinor said.

Lance slapped his face open-handed, and then the fight started. Spinor lunged forward, but Lance wasn't there, and Spinor felt something jolt into the side of his head. He swiv-

eled quickly, shooting out his foot as he turned and catching Lance on the knee. Lance winced with pain. He shot out his left, straight and hard.

Spinor grunted, swung furiously and hit Lance low on the stomach. Lance used his left again, bursting the skin over his enemy's cheek-bone. A thin trickle of blood ran down Spinor's cheek. They broke apart, glaring savagely. Lance jabbed with his left, and Spinor tried to grab his hand. Lance feinted with his left and hit with his right. Spinor jumped forward, grappling, and they wrestled. Spinor used his knee. Wallace doubled up with the pain of it. Spinor brought his fist down on the back of Lance's neck and the latter went down. Spinor gave a yell of triumph.

He dived—and he dived straight on to the heels of the cowboy's riding boots, and he yelled with the pain of it. Then he continued fighting with animal savagery, his fingers searching for his opponent's throat. Lance was underneath. His fist shot up and thudded into Spinor's face, which now looked like a lump of raw liver. Blood got into his eyes. Lance hit him again, then wriggled from underneath and clambered to his feet.

SPINOR got up more slowly, the muscles of his jaw tense. He roared and charged at his enemy. Lance stepped back one pace, and his fist moved from down near his hip, coming up in a vicious arc and landing right on the side of Spinor's jaw. The crack of breaking bone could be heard clearly in the silence, and Matt Spinor stretched himself on the ground.

Lance looked at him for a second, breathing deeply. Then he turned to the cowboy, rubbing his lips and looking at the blood transferred to the back of his hand. He retrieved his guns.

"Thanks, pardner."

"Hell, you hit like the kick of a mule."

"The Marshal's no beginner, either." Lance tried to regain his breath. "I guess I was lucky."

He slid his own guns home and took Spinor's, and after that he went over and unpinning the badge from the vest of the unconscious man. He walked through the crowd, and the men patted his shoulder as he went through. He went towards Ford Sharky's office. Sharky saw him coming and had a derringer levelled as Lance entered. "Put your hands up," he quavered. Lance sneered at the gun. He tossed the badge on to the desk and followed it with Spinor's .45. Then, with his hands on his hips, he glared at the Mayor. "There's your Marshal," he snapped. "There's going to be a new Marshal here, and a new Sheriff, and a new Mayor, all of 'em elected by the people."

Completely ignoring the gun, Lance leaned forward and smacked the Mayor's face. Then he turned and left the room, going straight across to Jed's Eating-house. All the tables were empty. He sat down as Julie came in.

"I saw that fight, Lance. I was very proud of you."

"Smile to show me how proud you were."

She smiled, and Lance was again reminded of Ruth Pinewood. It puzzled him. He thought about it for a moment. "What makes you sad, Julie?"

"This." She shrugged her shoulders. "Working in here all day and half the night when I should be—should be—" she bit her lip.

Julie went away. Lance stretched his tired legs and gazed out the door. Suddenly there was a shot from the window behind him—and Lance Wallace slumped forward over the table.

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WHEN consciousness came back, slowly, like through a thick cloud, Lance found he was in his own room in Mrs. Brown's house, and the lower right side of his chest felt to be on fire. Sitting next to the bed was Ruth Pinewood. He looked at her.

"How do you feel?" Ruth asked.

"Oh, fine. If you'd be leaving the room, Miss Ruth, I could get up and got on with the things I've got to do."

She shook her head gently. "You can't get up, Lance. Not yet."

He stared at her. "Why can't I get up? I'm fine—maybe a bit weak, but sure I'm fine. How long do you think I'm going to stay in bed?"

"Quite a long time. You've been here ten days, you know."

"What?" He gaped at her. "Sure you ain't kiddin' me along? Ten days! Why, I wasn't even hurt properly. Nicked by a bullet fired by a coward. I reckon I can get up."

"The bullet didn't nick you, Lance." Her eyes were gentle. "It went right through you, just missing the base of your lung. If it had been half an inch higher I—I would have lost the best foreman I've ever known and—and the best friend."

"It's doggone nice to hear you say that, Miss Ruth. What's been happening during the ten days I wasn't around to see it?"

"It's been bad," she said. "Hell broke loose. There were three killings the next day. The stage was held up, the driver and one of the passengers murdered. Dave Winter tried to form a vigilante committee; he was shot."

"What about on the Broken J?"

"Nothing much. The men are riding double, two on each line. They're

wonderful boys, Lance. Everybody in town, excepting for a few trusted friends, think you are dead. We even had a mock funeral, it was Julie's idea. Ford Sharky thinks you're dead, and Rupe Hendry and Duggin Clay. It was Clay who shot you, he boasts about it."

"That makes it doggone awkward," he said reflectively.

"Why,"

"I wasn't aiming to kill Clay." He tried to roll over, but the pain made him wince. "Look here, Miss Ruth, would you see if you could get a message to Victor Grant—and tell him to keep his mouth shut." He paused. "Ask him to come here."

"Of course."

Lance promptly went to sleep, as soon as Ruth left, and he didn't see Julie come into his room and look wonderingly down at his pale face. But he was awake when Victor Grant came.

Grant was lithe and sinewy, surprisingly young. "I thought you were dead."

"A lot of other hombres think I'm dead," Lance said grimly, "an' they sure won't like findin' out that I'm not. I asked you to come here because hell's broken out again. I want you to find some men you think would make good deputies, and a man to make a good Marshal. Talk to them privately. Don't let Sharky know what's going on."

"Doing little bits here and there won't help. Gunsmoke City needs sweeping out clean in one big movement."

"That's what I'm aiming for. I'll do the sweeping, Grant, but I want others to do what I can't do. We want you for a judge, honest and square; and we need a Marshal, and men to back me up when the gunplay starts. Sharky has fifteen or twenty men with him, and every one of those men must pay his penalty."

Grant left and began work immediately, even riding out to the Broken J to ask Red Wilson if he would consider becoming Marshal of Gunsmoke City. Red's eyes lit up. "If it'll help to kill off them rattlers infestin' the place, I sure will, Judge."

"You knew Lance Wallace was alive, didn't you?"

"What? Dammit, I helped to carry the coffin."

"It was half full of sand."

"Wal, that makes a whole lot of difference. Sure, I'll take on any job you like since Lance's still here and fighting. I'll sure take on anything you say."

Judge Victor Grant went back and visited more men he trusted, quietly, secretly, building up a team without weaknesses each man fired with the determination to see justice done.

WALLACE slept through most of it. He was awake when Ginger Pinewood visited him. Ginger looked harder and older, more serious as he changed from boyhood to manhood in the space of weeks. Ginger grinned at Wallace.

"So you won't die, you cuss."

"Not a chance, kid. How are things on the range?"

"Jake." The boy was brief. "When you picked the riders for the Broken J you sure picked ones that know their business. Red Wilson alone's a damn sight better'n all the old outfit put together. He sure knows how to work hosses and cattle."

"Where you going, kid?"

Ginger turned at the doorway. "I reckon I'll see if I can get you a pint of milk, cowboy. Wonderful stuff, milk, I'll send some along."

He went out into the street and turned toward *Mick's Saloon*. There was a feeling of tightness around his chest, but otherwise his nerves were steady. He pushed open the swing

doors and stood inside. After a moment he saw Duggin Clay. Suddenly all his muscles relaxed.

Clay looked over and saw him. "Outside, kid!" he yelled.

"I've come to get you, Duggin," Ginger said quietly, and there was something in his voice that brought a cold silence to the room. Men who had sneered at him before began to shuffle away from the bar, leaving a space wide of each man. Mick leaned over the bar. "Gents, please gents. Outside, please gents. Gents—"

Duggin was silent. The kid strangely resembled Lance Wallace in a way. Maybe the way he stood, with his muscles kind of loose, and his hand back a bit. Well, Wallace was gone, and now this kid could follow him.

Ginger felt icy cold, yet his body was relaxed. He remembered everything Lance had taught him—to move the hand without apparently moving it...like a rattlesnake getting away in a hurry; there it is an' there it ain't. He felt relaxed, calm, sure. And his hand was on his gun before Duggin knew it.

The kid fired three times. Duggin fired once, the shot going into the floor near his feet, and then he swayed, his hands clawing at his chest. The kid watched, tight-lipped. Duggin swayed more and more, then suddenly pitched forward onto his face, his gun jumping away and landing at Ginger's feet. Ginger looked at his enemy, then contemptuously kicked the gun towards him and went outside.

There, all the bravado went from him. He was sick.

IT WAS RUTH who told the convalescing Wallace the news, and her face was white as she spoke, and there was a certain horror in her voice.

Late the next night Lance rode back to the Broken J. He walked Nightway all the distance, Red Wilson on one

side of him, Ginger Pinewood on the other. He was tired when he arrived, but his wound hadn't opened up. And from the ranchhouse of the Broken J he began to direct preparations for the wholesale cleaning out of Gun-smoke City.

Judge Grant came to see him frequently, sometimes bringing other members of the team that was slowly being welded to form a tough fighting unit. Meanwhile violence continued unchecked in the town.

Despairing citizens met and decided to send a representative to the Governor of Nevada requesting the dismissal of corrupt Mayor Sharky. The representative was murdered three miles out of the town. Stagecoach robbery was common. Phoenix Coaches increased their guards—and the gold still disappeared just the same. Men were afraid to admit that they had discovered "color" lest they be killed for it. And through it all the door of the jail swung rusty and unused.

Ford Sharky was indubitably the leader of the organisation. He called in his lieutenants, Hendry, and Matt Spinor, who had taken Duggin Clay's place.

"The time is coming," Sharky said, "when we must take what we can get and clear out. I am leary of Federal investigators. I am *frightened* of the Federal Army. The time is approaching, gentlemen, when we must plan for a vast coup—and then vanish."

"You can have your gold," Hendry said. "I'll have the Broken J cattle."

"That, sir, has not been overlooked. I appreciate the value of the steers, and I suggest we formulate a plan to cover everything from the Express Office to the ranges. A co-ordinated plan, swift and complete."

"When?"

"The sooner the better," Spinor grumbled. "This town's gettin' too hot for me."

"I agree with you. The sooner the better. I suggest that we arrange three divisions: myself to handle the town business, Spinor to arrange the robbing of the Express Office and the escape with the cattle and arrange a market."

"Hell, I got a market straight across the Arizona line. And I got men to get the beef there."

"You'll need men, and good men, to get the cattle away from the Broken J. According to reports, the riders there are willing to fight. It might be better, I think, if we distracted them in some way."

"How?" Hendry asked bluntly.

The mayor shrugged his shoulders. "That will be your job. We'll arrange a date one month from today. Thank you, gentlemen; that is all."

AS WELL AS Lance Wallace, a mining engineer named John Brison was also planning to establish law in the town. He was a quiet efficient little man, mild-looking with a firmness of jaw which contradicted the mildness. He was invariably unarmed, and it was half an hour after Sharky's colleagues had left the office that Brison arrived.

"Mr. Mayor," he said politely, "I have a petition from one thousand and seven citizens of Gunsmoke City asking for your resignation."

"I cannot resign, sir, I cannot resign. Appointed by the Governor of Nevada, I can be relieved of office only by the Governor of Nevada."

"The people want your resignation, Mr. Mayor."

"I cannot give you that, sir. The Governor of Nevada... All I ask for, sir, is one month to prove I am capable of upholding the high honor of my office and to stamp out crime. Four weeks, sir. If I fail in that time, I shall go personally to the Governor and request that he accept my re-

signation immediately. Is that fair, sir, or is that not fair?"

"The citizens ask you to resign now."

"I cannot resign now." Sharky began getting red again, but thought better of it. "I think justice will be satisfied if, within one month, I am able to stamp out this brutal lawlessness, or else submit my resignation to the capital."

Brison hesitated. He didn't trust Ford Sharky, but he saw the reasonableness of the argument. On the other hand, his own opinion did not count; he was representing over one thousand people.

"I shall ask the people," he said briefly. "If they decide you are to have another month, then you shall; otherwise, their word is law."

"Quite, sir, quite. I bow to the will of the people."

"I'll let you know what they say." Brison went out with the feeling that Sharky was cheating in some way. The Mayor admitted the brutal lawlessness, yet had done nothing to check it.

It took him all day to obtain the opinions of the majority of the people who had signed the petitions, and in the finish he concluded that the opinion all round weighed in favor of letting Sharky stay for another month.

He told Sharky. "The voice of the majority has been heard; therefore you can stay."

"I shall uphold their confidence in me," Sharky said pompously. "I shall stamp out this evil. I assure you, sir, that I shall stamp out this evil."

When Brison had gone, Sharky sent a messenger for both Matt Spinor and Rupe Hendry, and when they were in his office he hooked his thumbs into his waist-coat.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have averted a crisis." He leaned forward. "But, gentlemen, in the next four weeks there must be no robbery and no gunplay."

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AT THE Broken J, Lance Wallace received the message that Julie Brown wanted to see him, and he replied by Red Wilson that he would arrive soon after midnight that night, and that the door of Mrs. Brown's house was to be left unlocked so that he could effect a quick entrance.

He didn't saddle Nightway, fearing that the animal might be recognised even in the darkness, but took one of the other half Morgan horses, and as he rode he kept his Stetson well down over his eyes and his slicker covering the lower part of his face. He let the horse run, dismounted quickly outside the house, hitched his pony, and went swiftly through the door.

Julie was waiting for him. "I'm glad you could come."

"Anything the matter, Julie?"

"Not with me. My mother is ill, but that isn't why I sent for you. I overheard Spinor and Hendry talking. I can't tell you anything much, but it seems that something big is going to happen in exactly four weeks from yesterday. Hendry was talking about a triple attack, and that Ford Sharky would handle the Gunsmoke City part of it."

"That'll take some thinking out," Lance said slowly. "Three attacks, and one of 'em, under Sharky, would be the town. I sure don't know what the other two'll be."

"I thought one would be—the Broken J herds."

"An' you might be right, Julie. Dog-gone it, you might be right. Working big. If they wanted a big clean-up, what's the third thing they'd do?"

Julie thought hard, then shook her head. "It might all be wrong, Lance," she said. "They might have been talking about something different, but that's what I thought they were talking about. It sounded that way."

"Sounds good enough to me."

"There's another thing," she said. "Over a thousand people here signed a petition asking Ford Sharky to resign. Sharky begged them to let him stay for another month—another four weeks. He very definitely stated four weeks."

"Looks kind of funny, kid. Keep your ears skinned for anything else you might hear, Julie, and let me know pronto."

Suddenly, from the next room, Mrs. Brown cried out. Julie ran into her. Lance wondered if he should go, or remain and be of possible help. He remained, listening to Julie move around. After a time she returned.

"My mother had a heart attack. Severe. She would like to see you, Lance."

He went in. The room was lit dimly, and the woman in the bed looked yellow.

She took short quick breaths, and her frail hand moved in a feeble motion. Yet her voice was clear. "I'm going to die. Don't try to tell me I'm not, because I know I am. I'm going to die tonight, but I want to tell you something I haven't told anybody in twenty years—except Julie, and I was wrong in telling her."

"If you'd rather keep your secret—"

"Don't be a fool, young man," she snapped. "If I wanted to keep it a secret, I wouldn't have called you in." She was silent for a minute, trying to get her breath. "It's about—about Alfred Pinewood. Come closer, young man, come closer."

Lance moved nearer the bed. Mrs. Brown was sinking fast, yet her voice remained rich and clear. Slowly she told Wallace, and then Lance knew why Julie seldom smiled. "Thank you,

ma'am, for your confidence."

Lance went out. "Julie," he said gently. "Your mother is going. She wants to see you."

Julie went to her mother. Lance let himself out quietly, mounted his horse and rode away. There was nothing he could do to help that night. Julie wanted to be alone with her grief. In the morning he would ask Ruth to go to town to comfort the girl. He was thoughtful as he rode back to the Broken J.

IN THE MORNING he spoke to Ruth, asking her to go to Gunsmoke City and explaining why. Ruth showed momentary surprise.

"Of course, Lance," she said, "but I don't know Julie except for having met her when you were there, wounded."

"I'd be mighty grateful if you'd go. Julie's had a hard life, and she shouldn't have. There's a reason. I can't tell you, but I'd be grateful if you were along with Julie to help."

"Of course, I'll be glad to."

Ruth was like that, Lance thought. He thought about Julie as he went to find Red Wilson and Tom Barron, to tell them what he had learned from Julie.

"If it's a cleanup," Red said, "they'll sure be scramblin' for the cows. Yes, sir. Gold's valuable, but somehow 'tain't so durned valuable as steers."

"Yeh. But what the third thing is is a cussed mystery."

"Wal, I'm a maverick," Red said suddenly. "It's stickin' up like a mountain into the sky. The stage. Thursday's gold day. Sure, it'll be the dog-gone stage with a freight of color." He nodded his head. "The stage for sartin."

"You're right, Red; that's the third. Sure, they reckon as how there's go-in' to be a big cleanup, but they just don't realize how doggone big. Half the fellas in town's ready to blow hell

out of Sharky and Hendry, and we'll sure help 'em."

Lance left the other two and went in search of Ginger. He found him riding herd on the far side of the range, and practising the draw while he was doing it. Lance grinned.

Lance watched. Ginger Pinewood was good with a gun, good with horses, good with cows. When he came back, Lance told him all he had learned.

The boy's eyes shone. "Gee, ain't there goin' to be an un-holy scrap."

"You'll be in it, boy—right up to your neck. I want you to travel with the stagecoach. The coach'll be full of guns and men ready to shoot 'em."

"Don't sound too exciting."

"I'm asking you to take charge, kid. I want a straight answer."

"Yep. I'll do it."

"And that's the answer I wanted. You'll get your excitement all right. In fact you'll be doggone lucky if you don't get a bellyful of lead. This isn't going to be a small raid, but a big one, with everything thrown in. For all I could say, it might last for a week.

The kid cheered up immediately. "Sure."

Wallace went back to the ranch, where he found Judge Grant waiting to see him. Grant shook his hand. "I'm glad to see you looking so well, Lance."

"I'm durned glad to be feeling so well, and I'm glad you're here. There's a fella called John Brison getting the people behind him for a showdown with Ford Sharky. I want you to get in touch with Brison and tell him to hold his horses for a few weeks."

"I came to tell you about Brison. Good fellow. Make a good mayor. Another thing I came to tell you is that I can get hold of another twelve reliable cowmen for you."

Lance shook his head slowly. "We need 'em, and we're goin' to need 'em a whole lot worse when the shooting starts; but Miss Pinewood just

can't afford any more on the payroll. Things have been bad on the Broken J."

Grant's eyebrows rose. "I thought Miss Pinewood was rich, very rich."

"Hell, no."

"Well, then, why in heaven's name doesn't she collect rent from the town. Gunsmoke City is built on her property—Broken J. She can't interfere with mining rights, but she can collect enough rent to keep her in comfort for the rest of her life."

"I didn't know that," Lance said softly. "And my guess is that neither did Miss Ruth."

"I can assure you that it's quite correct. Any court in the country will uphold it."

Lance thought it over for a while. It would make a big difference to Ruth Pinewood.

Grant made preparations to leave. He picked up his hat and brushed it on his sleeve. "Tell Brison there's somebody to see him. Don't say it's me, because I'm supposed to be a corpse. But we want all the action to come at once. There's no good in Brison chasing Sharky one day and us chasing him another. We want one big movement—every man doing his job."

"I'll see Brison immediately—and I'll keep watch on Sharky."

TWO HOURS after Judge Victor Grant had gone, Ruth Pinewood came back. She was pale, her full red lips tightly compressed, and there was a depth of pain hard in her eyes. She looked at Lance some time before speaking.

"You knew?"

Lance nodded slowly. "Mrs. Brown told me."

"That's why you wanted me to go to her? Because she's my—my half sister?"

"Yes. I thought...well, I thought you'd be glad to go."

"You did the right thing. It hurts to know that she's been suffering ter-

ribly because of—of my father's folly. She's his daughter; perhaps not quite as I'm his daughter; but my father was Julie's father—and he didn't know. Julie's been suffering, slaving night and day in Jed's place."

Lance breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sure glad you look at it like that, Ruth."

"Yes. I asked her to come here, but she won't."

"When everything's settled and she's over her grief she might think about it."

"I hope so. Oh, I hope so. Not only do I respect her, but I like her." She changed the subject abruptly. "What did Judge Grant want, Lance?"

"Two things, both good news. He told me there's going to be a lot of men on our side when the battle starts. Fella called John Brison is doing it and I've asked Brison to come out here."

"I've heard of him. A mining engineer."

"The second thing concerns you, Ruth." He smiled. "Judge Grant says that you're entitled to collect rental from every person with a holding in Gunsmoke City. It's your town, it's on your land."

Her lips were apart. "Are you—sure?"

"Not me—Grant. He's sure; says any court will uphold it."

"It doesn't seem possible."

"Doggone it, why not? You hold the title to the land; people come an' squat on it, and you charge them rent, same as any other place. That's the law from Oregon to New Mexico."

"It's going to make a difference."

"Sure. Going to ease your troubles a lot, Ruth. No more worry about how you can pay your cowpokes when the end of the month comes around. No more fretting about having to sell cayuses. No more struggling."

"I wasn't thinking of that."

"No. Well, I'm durned sure that's what I'd be thinking of."

"I was thinking," she said slowly,

"that I might be able to do something for my sister."

- 7 -



ORD SHARKY planned with great thoroughness and considerable skill. With his two lieutenants, Matt Spinor and Rupe Hendry, he organized a simultaneous attack on the Broken J herds, the south-bound stage, and the Express Office, which was being used as a bank by many townspeople. He had, too, a surprising number of men willing to work with him—the scum of Gunsmoke City and from the ranges as far down as Arizona. He felt well pleased with his plans.

"Your business, sir," he said to Hendry, "is with the cattle. It will be a daylight raid. Enough men will be put at your disposal to ensure success."

Hendry nodded curtly. "Sure. I've got it worked out. Take the steers, thousands of 'em, through Gadwin Pass, then bottle up the pass with a dozen men. There just ain't nobody going to get rough on us—unless he has wings."

"Good. What about you, Matt?"

"I reckon I'm jake. Nothin' very hard about it. Double ambush, so if the stage busts the first, they still have to bust the second, which ain't likely. Only need twelve men."

"Splendid." Sharky was at his pompous best. "And I have made full arrangements concerning the Express Office. But gentlemen, no plan is complete without the loophole for escape. I propose to formulate such a loophole."

"I guess that's plumb sensible," Hendry said.

Sharky jerked his head importantly.

"I suggest, gentlemen, that *we* have absolutely nothing to do with the carrying out of the coup. Nothing. We have organized, we have instructed; we have sufficient men at our disposal to warrant success. I suggest, gentlemen, that we calmly sit here in my office awaiting results."

The two lieutenants looked at each other. Men of action, the idea of letting other people do the work was repugnant to them; but they were sensible enough to see the wisdom of Sharky's advice. Neither of them spoke.

"If the unforeseen happens," Sharky continued, "and the plans fail, no scrap of guilt could be attached to us. We should be free to make a leisurely escape."

"What about the gold, if the plans don't fail?"

"I have selected men I can trust implicitly. We should arrange to meet in Beckton, just across the border, where the profits would be divided between the three of us, less the amounts paid to our assistants. I am suggesting, gentlemen, that we shall clear over one hundred thousand dollars profits each. *Each*, mark you."

"Seems jake to me," Spinor said.

"Yeh. If you can trust the men," Hendry put in.

Sharky leaned forward. "Quite, but even if the men are not trustworthy, there is little danger. As soon as we are advised of the success of the plan, we shall go to our respective positions and take control. You, Hendry, will catch up with the herd; and you, Matt, will catch up with your riders. There is little chance they would escape."

"And you?"

"I shall go directly to Beckton. Any more questions, gentlemen?"

They shook their heads. "Good," Sharky said, "then we shall shake hands all around."

DURING that month, the killing rate in Gunsmoke City dropped from over one a day to less than one in three

days, and the citizens were lulled into the belief that Mayor Ford Sharky had taken the lesson to heart and was outlawing crime. Not so, however, were John Brison, Ginger Pinewood and Lance Wallace deceived.

Ginger paid regular visits to the agents of the Phoenix Coaches and formed a plan to operate smoothly and efficiently. Brison, using the same office, planned the defence of the town, advising a few men he could trust, and marshalling his forces behind him. Lance and Red Wilson prepared to defend the range and the Broken J ranch buildings.

And when that fateful Thursday came, all appeared to be peace and quiet. Lance Wallace, expecting a simultaneous thrust, knew to the hour when the attack would come. Gun-smoke City sensed no tension; the atmosphere was normal.

Phoenix driver Albert Swan watched a small group of horsemen ride along the street. He nodded imperceptibly and went to Jed's stables to harness his horse. It took him an hour to prepare the coach and take it to the front of the office. He began piling the luggage.

An elderly woman spoke to him, got inside. The elderly woman was Ginger Pinewood, disguised by his sister. A fussy little man followed a few minutes later, and then a bearded miner. Just the usual type of passengers; nothing to arouse suspicion.

Sharky watched from his window, his mouth dry. He saw a slightly-drunk cowboy follow the miner, and then a dapper townsman got in, flicking the dust from his boots as he turned in the doorway.

Albert Swan and the guard went inside the office again and came out carrying a box of bullion. It was heavy. They heaved it on board and the coach shook. Swan locked it away, returned to the office for a moment, came out again tucking a sheaf of papers into his pocket. He mounted the platform.

The guard got up beside him. Swan picked up his whip and the horses lunged forward.

Inside, Ginger Pinewood felt the lurch and his heart beat fast. He looked at his companions, picked men of iron nerve, deadly gunmen, steady fighters. He had planned carefully, even foreseeing Hendry's idea of a double ambush. Ginger had planned to counter it. The men were silent. Ginger took off his feminine rig and buckled his guns to his hip. The dapper townsman opened a case and took out a pair of .45's. The fussy little man unwrapped a parcel to reveal a Winchester, shiny with oil. The miner removed his coat to display a colt on his hip and a derringer under his arm.

The coach rocked along the trail. It was hot. The men sweated. Driver Albert Swan and the guard watched the trail ahead, every nerve tense. They were silent.

In the coach, Ginger spoke for the first time. "You know what to do?"

"Sure, Kid."

Now the country was getting rough, with the road sweeping and curving along arroyos and past boulders. Dust rose in the still air and clouded along the trail, and then suddenly the driver applied the brakes. Every man heard the curt, ringing voice.

"Reach!"

THE GUARD fired. There was a volley, and the guard pitched sideways and tumbled to the ground. Ginger nodded. Guns thundered in the coach. The six horsemen scattered, two of them falling. Ginger slipped out the door, shooting as he moved. The driver leaped down, still holding the reins with the other.

The dapper little man followed Ginger out the door, and suddenly he slithered down the side of the coach, his shirt stained red. A rifle cracked. Ginger fired at the smoke. A stinging burn flicked the flesh of his upper arm. He watched Swan shooting recklessly as the outlaws dived for cover.

Ginger looked at the miner. "Get the other side," he snapped.

The miner was just in time to see a bunch of horsemen racing in from the far side. He fired. The cowboy was blazing away from the window of the coach, and Albert Swan fought with the panicking horses. A bullet nicked the muscle of Ginger's leg, and for a moment he was anxious. The shooting was deadly, they could last only a matter of minutes as, protected only by the flimsy coach, they were attacked from both sides.

Then he yelled. Racing towards them in a flat gallop rode a group of horsemen—his men. Their guns thundered in one continual roll. They circled the stage and the holdup men. Ginger shot an outlaw trying to slither round a rock. He signalled the leader of the riders to come in, narrow the circle.

The robbers were in a hopeless position, and they knew it. One of them raised a stick with a white handkerchief on it and waved it backwards and forwards.

"Hold your fire!" Ginger yelled. Then: "Hey! You with the flag, stand up and come forward."

The man did so.

"Tell your men to come forward with their hands up," Ginger snapped. "An' if any of 'em gets careless with his shootin' iron he's sure goin' to get plugged from four sides at once."

The outlaw came out. There were seven left of the original thirteen, and one of the seven was so badly hurt that he died later. They dropped their guns. Ginger ordered a man to search them for concealed weapons. Then the gang was ordered into the coach under the care of a trigger-happy cowpunch.

And that, Ginger decided regretfully, was the end of the fight.

But in Gunsmoke City, the fight continued. A group of riders dismounted outside the Express Office and went in, each man drawing his revolver. The clerk looked at them.

"I wouldn't do nothin' rash, boys," he said softly. "There's about ten guns trained on you plumb center right now."

Brison was standing next to the clerk. The raider looked around the office, and coming up from behind every piece of furniture, from behind every door and wall, was a grimaced man. One of the raiders panicked; he fired. And the resultant fusillade set off a battle in the town that lasted for an hour.

Brison's planning had been perfect. All the way along the street men were posted to attack Sharky's horsemen, and they wasted few shots. The raiders scattered, shooting wildly as they ran, ducking for cover and bolting for buildings they knew were friendly. One rider galloped his horse straight through the open door of Dinny Carr's general store, and got a bullet through his forehead the moment he was through. Carr had changed sides.

Ruth Pinewood, in town against Lance's advice, was in Jed's eating-house with Julie Brown. As the shots echoed along the street they turned the restaurant into a hospital, treating friend and foe alike, and disarming each. A horse screamed as a stray bullet tore through its flanks. Men yelled, and the firing was incessant. A man ran across the street, suddenly threw up his hands and fell.

Ruth felt ill. She walked out of the room across towards the fallen man. A trickle of blood ran down from his lips, but his eyes watched her as she bent over him.

"Don't—don't worry about me," he gasped. "I'm—I'm on the...the wrong side."

Very carefully she put her hands under his arm-pits and began dragging him across to Jed's place. A burst of shots sounded very close to her, and a piece of gravel from the road flew up and stung her leg. Foot by foot she dragged the man along. In a few seconds Julie came out to help her.

The man was dead before he was lowered to the floor.

FORD SHARKY, with Matt and Rupe beside him, watched the battle with set lips and horror in his eyes. His plan had been met by a brilliant counterplan, indicating that the news had somehow leaked out. Each of the three men was armed, but none of them fired a shot. Hendry drew his gun once.

Sharky gripped his arm savagely. "Don't be a damned fool. The only hope we have is to keep out of it."

"We haven't any hope," Matt said dully.

"Why not?"

"They're sure cleanin' up the town—us included."

"We're not finished yet," Sharky said grimly. "Nobody can prove we had anything to do with it. They may *suspect*, but they can't prove it; and if they have an honest court afterwards, they'll need proof."

"I don't aim to hang," Hendry said coldly. "When I get the chance, I'm going hell for leather for the border."

"If you show yourself at the door, Hendry, you'll be riddled," Sharky was insistent. "Keep out of it. That's our only hope; keep right out of it."

A shot smashed Sharky's window. The men looked at one another. Firing suddenly increased further along the street. It was impossible to guess the number of casualties, but one thing became more and more apparent—the raiders were doomed.

Ruth Pinewood went out into the street to bring in another man. She became aware that most of the shooting was coming from Earl Thompson's place, where the outlaws seemed to have gathered. She began dragging the man, who was shot through both legs. He winced as she moved him. Suddenly there was a rifle shot, and the man died in her arms.

Ruth stood upright. She walked steadily along the street away from

Jed's, going towards the centre of the fire. Her face was set and ashen, yet her steps never faltered. A hundred eyes watched every moment she made. She stopped outside Earl Thompson's place and raised her hands as though for silence.

The guns became silent, bringing a deathly hush to the town. Ruth spoke loudly; every word was clear.

"Men!" she cried. "You are doomed. There is no escape for you, for you are outnumbered ten to one. You are wasting life, both your own and ours. Surrender. I give you my promise to see you have a fair and honest trial. Surrender now. Come out of the house with your hands raised. I guarantee you protection. You have no alternative."

Inside the building the men watched her. She spoke again. "You have one minute to decide!"

The men looked at one another, most of them realising the truth of the girl's statement. They were doomed—rats caught in a trap. Yet they were men who fought to the finish, to whom surrender meant weakness.

Earl Thompson spoke to them. "We have a minute. Speak."

A little, snipe-faced rustler spoke. "I die with my gun smokin' pardner."

"It's sensible to surrender," another said. "Sure, I was goin' to get paid for doin' this, but I didn't hire out my gun for a dollar. If most want to surrender, I'm with 'em."

"I reckon as how I didn't hire out my gun, neither," another said. "To hell with Sharky."

"I'm stayin'," the small one said. He raised his revolver, aiming it at Ruth Pinewood. Earl Thompson shot him through the head before his finger pulled on the trigger. The shot sounded loud in the silence.

"That settles it for me," Thompson said quietly. "I quit."

"I reckon we all quit."

Thompson went near to the window, but was careful not to show himself.

"We're coming out, ma'am, with our han's raised like you said. We hold you personally responsible if any of your side shoots at us while we're doin' it."

"You have my word."

THEY FILED from the building and stood in front of her. She waited. Then John Brison came from the Express Office and began stripping them of their guns, dumping them in a heap in the centre of the road. Suddenly from every building men appeared, their hands raised, to join the group, until thirty unarmed men faced Ruth Pinewood.

She turned to Brison. "I think you'd better take them to the saloon," she said. "It's the only place with a big enough room."

Brison called for a couple of assistants, then addressed the prisoners. "Mick's Saloon," he snapped. "And keep remembering there's a hundred armed men watching and waiting for an excuse to plug you. Get moving."

The platoon marched towards Mick's bar. Ford Sharky watched them. His face was wet with perspiration, and he felt desperately sick inside him.

The rout was completed on the ranges of the Broken J. Sharkey knew it would end there. The disaster would be complete.

Rupe Hendry began to lose his nerve. "I reckon I'll quit," he said. "While it's quiet."

"They'll get you, Hendry. There's nothing surer."

Hendry pointed from the window. "Look, every hombre in the place is walkin' around now. They won't even notice me."

"I warn you, Hendry, I warn you strongly."

Hendry ignored him. Trying to look casual, he sauntered towards the door. A shot echoed out and a bullet split the wood of the doorframe over Hendry's head. He ducked back,

cursing, ran through the house to the back door. Exactly the same thing happened. He went back to the others, his face the color of chalk.

"Look!" Matt Spinor said briefly.

Hendry looked. Coming slowly along the street was a group of horsemen, unarmed and guarded by a bunch of riders from the Broken J ranch—and the group was less than half the number that had gone out. And, coming into Gunsmoke City from the other end, rolled the stage, followed by a group led by Ginger Pinewood.

"Beaten at every turn," Sharky whispered. "By gawd, beaten at every turn." He wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Our only hope, gentlemen, is to deny everything, to swear we have nothing to do with it."

"What hope's that!" Hendry said harshly.

"Gentlemen, please."

"It was you who got us into this, Sharky," Spinor said softly.

Rupe Hendry nodded his head. "It sure was. It was your idea, Sharky, your damned idea that's going to have us killed, your blasted bungling. And if you could, you'd see us hanged to save your own dirty neck."

Sharky flapped his hands. "Please. Gentlemen, I implore you to act with discretion."

"Yeh. Like the discretion you used. A hundred thousand dollars each. Bah! A necktie party each. Damn you, Sharky!"

"It wasn't *my* fault," Sharky bleated. "The news leaked out, I swear it. It was from one of you two. You, Spinor."

"Like hell it was me," Spinor snapped.

"Well, it wasn't me. I tell you it wasn't me. It must have been Hendry. I swear it wasn't me."

"Don't try to pin it on to me," Hendry snarled. "You made all the money out of this, Sharky. All along you've taken your dirty cut, and I

guess you had it worked out to have Matt and me plugged as soon as the money came in."

"Hendry. For God's sake, Hendry," a cool voice said from the doorway.

THEY SWUNG about, their eyes widening with appalling horror when they saw Lance Wallace standing there, his hands on his hips, an ironic little smile on his lips. Wallace, who had been dead for five weeks! Hell, they'd seen his funeral.

"No. I'm not a corpse, boys," Lance said easily. "Not quite." He saw Hendry's restlessness. "Sure you can go to your gun as soon as you like, Rupe. Reach whenever you want to."

Hendry froze. Ford Sharky was blubbering.

"The fight's all over," Lance continued. "It must have cost between thirty and thirty-five lives, yours and ours, but mostly yours. You boys murdered those men, like you've murdered scores of others."

"I had nothing to do with it," Sharky shrilled. "I tell you I had nothing to do with it. I swear—"

"Shut up," Lance said curtly. "I haven't finished. You, in particular Sharky, helped to give Gunsmoke City its name—a town built on the smoke of forty-fives, on death and robbery, a boomtown and a helltown. You made it that way, and you'll pay the penalty."

"Shut up!" Spinor snarled. Wallace hadn't touched his guns. Matt Spinor noticed that. It was a challenge. Spinor wondered if he could accept that challenge—and get away with it.

"I'm going to kill you. All of you," Lance said gently. "The first man to drag his gun is going to be responsible for the death of the other two, and I'm waiting."

"Don't touch your guns," Sharky pleaded. "Don't touch your guns. Please."

"You've got a gun of your own,"

Lance reminded him. "Use it. Get ready to use it, because I'm not going to spare you, Sharky. Be a man and not a yellow coyote."

Hendry was working out his chances. The first man to reach would inevitably draw Lance's first shot. If only he could get Spinor to drag at his iron first, give him a chance.

"I'm waiting," Lance said. "Three against one."

Nobody moved. The tension mounted. The four men were like statues, only Lance was easy and relaxed with that deadly freedom of muscles.

"I'm giving you a chance," he urged. "Take it."

None of them moved. Lance waited a minute. The clock on the wall ticked loudly. Lance listened to it unconsciously. Suddenly he grinned.

"You won't draw, boys? Hear that clock. In ten ticks of it I'm going to start shooting. Ten ticks from—now!"

The sixth tick came slowly, then the seventh...the eighth...

The three men facing him were stiff. Hendry was chalky. Ford Sharky whimpered unknowingly. Matt Spinor's face was shiny with sweat.

The ninth tick sounded. The tension became unbearable. Rupe Hendry, his nerve at breaking point, couldn't stand any more of it. His hand moved, but it lacked the lightning of both Lance's hands. Lance's two guns roared together. Hendry pitched sideways, spinning with the impact of the bullet. Spinor reached his gun and fired, but his shot went into the ceiling as his legs collapsed.

Sharky hadn't moved. Lance faced him with smoking guns. "Draw," he said.

"Sir, I beg—"

"Be a man," Lance urged. "You're going to die, Sharky. One way or

other you're going to die. Die like a man instead of at the end of a rope."

SHARKY tried to get control of himself. He pushed back his shoulders. Then his hand moved with ponderous slowness to his gun. Lance let the gun come clear of the holster, let Sharky fire, and then fired himself. Sharky's wild bullet grazed his forehead, and then the former mayor lurched forward on to his face.

Lance went over to Jed's eating-house. All the wounded men had been removed, yet there was still an atmosphere of tension, and the burning tang of gunsmoke in the room. Lance sat down. Julie came across. Lance grinned at her. "I'll have eggs, Julie."

She went away. Lance heard somebody come in behind him, and then Ruth Pinewood was standing beside him. He got to his feet, his eyes bulging. "What the heck are you doing here?"

"I've been here all the time nursing the wounded, helping where I could. It was dreadful, Lance, but I'm glad it happened. Gunsmoke City is clean, free of evil."

"Have you seen Ginger yet?"

"Yes. He's all right. Two wounds, but he's so proud of them I don't know what he'll do when they've healed. Get some more. I suppose," she said sadly.

"You shouldn't have been here, Ruth."

"I wanted to be—to be near someone," she said awkwardly.

"Julie?"

"No. Not Julie." Her voice softened. "You, Lance." She blushed redly. "I wanted to be near Julie, too. I asked Julie to come and live on the ranch, but she won't. So I gave her the land the town's built on. This land. It's all hers. She has all the rent, and she need never work again. She's earned it, Lance."

"Just like you, Ruth. Splendid." His hands sought hers under the table, enjoying the pleasure of the contact, the soft, warm strength of them, and he saw the quiet longing in her eyes.

Julie returned, but she didn't fail to notice the contact of their hands. Lance released Ruth reluctantly and looked up at her half-sister.

"I believe you're a doggone woman of property, Julie?"

"Through Ruth's kindness, I am."

"You've earned it."

She put the tray down. "First thing I'm doing is to donate the corner lot for the building of a church."

Lance raised his eyebrows. "Sure. But why a church?"

"Some folks hereabouts," Julie said pointedly, "might like to get married purty soon, I fancy."

Lance and Ruth laughed—and knew Julie Brown spoke the truth.



LOST RANGE

Novel of Bitter Seeking

by Will Cotton

The Brants were the only folks that Jim Lavery had ever known; they had treated him as if he were their own son. And now Gennie Brant was a woman, ready for the love that awakened in him. But Fate dealt a crushing blow to old Brant, and Jim found that he had a promise to fulfill. Only—how could a man branded as a killer hope to find justice?

JIM LAVERY didn't like town. It made him feel boxed in, like being in a room that didn't have any doors, where the air was heavy and hard to breathe. And there was always the chance of running into someone who knew him before. In a town, you couldn't escape that chance.

He reined his dun before the flat false front of the Longhorn Hotel and dropped to the ground. Eyes narrowed, he glanced up and down the board sidewalk, noting the loungers outside *Freddie's Saloon*—the woman who came out of the Mercantile, a basket over her arm, and turned to make her way slowly down the street, the two boys squatted in the sun, playing mumbley peg.

Tying his mount to the hitching rack, Lavery stepped up to the sidewalk and brushed the dust from his levis. He was in his early twenties, tall and solid, with lean clean features. You noticed about him the wariness behind the clear grayness of his eyes and the big hands with their long, capable fingers.

He thought, now he was here, it was best to get his business over

quickly. He pushed open the door to the hotel and went inside, smelling the hot mustiness mingled with the odor of old cooking.

The clerk told him that Tom Hyson was in the bar. Lavery walked down the worn carpet, hands hanging loose at his sides, uneasiness lying restlessly in the pit of his stomach. When he turned in at the bar, he saw Hyson sitting by himself at a table with a bottle and glass before him. Two other men, elbows crooked on the walnut bar, were talking to the bartender. Only the top people around Dawling used the bar at the Longhorn. It was like an exclusive club. If you didn't belong, you drank at *Freddie's* or the *Oriental*. There weren't many who belonged.

He saw Tom Hyson glance up at him as he came in. Lavery went over to him and pulled out an empty chair. He said: "Brant couldn't make it, Hyson. He sent me instead."

"Sit down, then."

Hyson's voice was soft and flat. Not what you'd expect. He picked up the bottle, tilted it and poured himself a fresh glass of whisky. The



"Hunt knocked the girl down, and when he started to kick her, I went for my gun . . ."

flesh of his face was full and slippery over thick bones, but there was a hardness at the corners of his mouth and a bleakness to his shallow eyes that gave a hint of his true nature.

Lavery watched Hyson drink. He spread his hands, palms down, out on the edge of the table. "Brant said he'll have the money. But he needs a little time."

Hyson set his glass down. "Brant's *had* time. Too much, already."

Uneasily, Lavery shifted in his chair.

"He realized that. Brant appreciates what you done. Now we got some cows cut out and we're drivin' them to

the railhead, startin' tomorrow. If you kin wait a week or so . . ."

Hyson took another drink. A trickle of whisky ran down his chin. He wiped at it with his hand. "I told Brant my patience was gone. Today was the deadline."

"Brant hasn't been so well. And you know what it was like last winter; we lost over two hundred head in the summer. The cows were so lean they wouldn't have brung enough to pay off the help. As it is, Brant will barely make it."

"I heard all that before," Hyson said without raising his tone. "Fellers like Brant know I ain't lending money out of charity. I want one

thousand dollars. Today. You kin go and tell Brant that."

"Thanks," Lavery said roughly. "I see what you mean."

He pushed back the chair and stood up. He could feel the blood pounding in his temples and he wanted to reach out and grab Tom Hyson by the throat and shake him. His hands clenched at his side.

Hyson got to his feet, too. "That ain't no way to talk," he sputtered. "Not to Tom Hyson."

"I talk the way I feel. If you don't like it, don't listen."

LAVERY TURNED on his heel. He heard a movement behind him, then, suddenly, a bottle went flying past his ear.

He wheeled, anger exploding within him, filling his brain with a swirling madness, driving hot blood through his body. Tom Hyson was bending forward, pawing for the glass.

Lavery brought his knee up under the table, spilling it toward Hyson. The glass slid off and shattered on the floor. Then Lavery pushed the table aside and moved in on Hyson swinging.

He didn't notice the man who peeled away from the bar and started circling in behind him. His knuckles cracked against Hyson's chin.

Hyson's head snapped half around. Lavery brought in his left, then, catching Hyson in the middle.

He heard Hyson gasp for air as he backed away. He thought, *Hyson has no fight*. It wasn't any good to go after a guy like that. It was like chopping down paper trees. He stood there, the pulse in his temples throbbing, wanting to break out to punish Hyson and knowing he couldn't. Not that way.

The blow from behind caught him unexpectedly.

Lavery's head seemed to split wide open. He felt the blow driving him

downward, and he tried to brace his knees and twist around while the sparks danced in his brain.

He succeeded, partly. He stiffened and weaved, smashing out with his fists. Slammed them into someone who was driving him back under a steady rain of punishing punches.

Lavery's eyes were clouded with a mist of pain. His breath was raw and sharp in his chest. He could taste the saltiness of blood in his mouth.

He tried to stand his ground. Clamping his teeth tight, he put all his strength behind his blows, feeling the sting run up his forearm as bone met bone.

But he knew, with a vague understanding, that the first smashing blow on his head had been the end. That all this was only postponing the inevitable, and he wished it was over—that he could just let the fog take over and swallow him up.

The fight in him died hard. He slashed out blindly. But he was rocked back under a driving blow that seemed to crack his jaw and tangled with a vivid clarity the face staring into his. It was a face he had seen before—a face swimming up at him out of the past. Then he was lifted up and slammed back against the floor. Abruptly his skull exploded. He lay there motionless, all consciousness driven out of him.

SOMEONE was sloshing water in his face.

Lavery sat up, running his hand over his chin. A thousand hammers beat in his head. For a moment he thought he was going to be sick. Then the nausea passed and he opened his eyes and tried to make out where he was.

"Comin' around, eh?" a man's voice asked.

"Reckon so," he answered thickly.

The man came close and bent over him. A thin, leathery face with soft brown eyes and graying beard. The

man smiled gently. "You was like to be broken apart," the man said then. "I come on you out in the alley out behind the Longhorn. Danged near stepped on you in the dark. Only I heard you was moanin' a little. Whoever left you there must have thought you was plumb finished."

He sighed and moved away.

Lavery's vision was clearing. He saw that he was in a small cabin, although in the dim light from the lamp he couldn't make out the details. He raised himself up on his elbows. The movement made him groggy. He heard the man's footsteps shuffling about but he couldn't see him in the shadows.

"I owe you some thanks," Lavery said. "But I don't aim to bother you none."

"You don't bother me."

"I'll git back to where I belong; some day, maybe, I kin do you a turn."

The man moved over into the light. He looked older than Lavery had thought. The lamp light picked out the deep lines in his leathery face.

"You ain't fit to move just yit..."

Lavery swung his legs over the edge of the bunk. He knew the old man was right; but he wanted to get back to the Lazy Y and tell Brant about what Hyson had said.

There was going to be trouble, he knew that. "I'll make out," Lavery said. "It's just that I got to go."

The old man nodded.

"I need a horse."

"You kin borrow mine. It's an old nag with stiff legs, like me. But it's willin'."

Lavery stood up. For a moment the room tilted back and forth. He steadied himself holding on to the edge of the bunk.

"My boots..."

"By the bunk," the old man said. "You shouldn't be leavin'."

He drew on his boots slowly, wondering if he could make it to the

Lazy Y. But he had to. Brant had been decent to him, and he wasn't letting him down. There wasn't any one else who had treated him so decent. And there was Gennie, too. And Mrs. Brant.

HE FOLLOWED the old man outside and waited, trying to gather his strength, while the old man saddled the mare. It was a thin, worn out horse, like the old man had said.

"Here, I'll cinch her," Lavery offered.

"That's all right, son."

"I'll bring her back in the morning."

"I don't ride much any more, but I like to have her around. So if you kin..."

"I can, sure enough. And thanks again."

He shoved a toe in the worn stirrup. Grabbed the horn and slowly pulled himself up. He felt suddenly appalled at his weakness. He sat still a moment, holding the horn trembling from the effort. "My name's Lavery. From the Lazy Y outfit."

"Glad to know you, son," the old man answered. "My handle's Triggers." Remembering, he chuckled softly to himself.

Lavery felt a stab in his guts, sharp and cutting, like a knife being driven in. He said hollowly: "I knew a feller by that name once. Hunt Triggers."

The old man sucked in his breath. The horse began pawing at the ground as if eager to be off. Lavery looked up at the stars, low and clear in the night sky. He wished now he hadn't said that.

"Hunt Triggers was my boy. He was killed, somewhere down in New Mexico."

Lavery didn't say anything. He brought the nag around and touched its thin flanks lightly with his rowels. He left the old man standing there.

He figured there wasn't any use

letting the old man know that it was he, Jim Lavery, who had killed his boy in the desert outside of Santa Fe.

HE COULD tell something was wrong before he reached Lazy Y.

Coming over the rise, he saw the lanterns and the men and the strange sounds that made a low counter-melody to the breeze sweeping down off the hills.

Leaning forward in the saddle, he urged the pony into a gallop. It was as if cold fingers had reached inside him and were squeezing at his heart. Sweat came out on his forehead.

He found Brant over by the corral, directing the hands as they loaded the wagon. Lavery dropped to the ground and ran over to him. "What's up, Brant?" he asked breathlessly. "We're pulling out, Jim. Before daylight."

"But you can't. This is your spread, Brant."

He couldn't see Brant's face, but the tired bitterness in his tone told Lavery enough. "It ain't my spread any more. Hyson and the sheriff come out at sundown. It's legal, Jim. They give me twenty-four hours to clear out; I'll be away before that."

Lavery felt the hands at his side tighten. "We kin fight this out, Brant. Me and the hands will stick by you."

Brant's hand rested heavily on his shoulder. It's past time for that. I'm old, and I ain't so hearty anymore. My fight's all used up. Anyway, the law is right. If you don't pay your debts, you take the consequences."

"But where'll we go? What will we do now, Brant?"

"I got some money. He drove a hard bargain, but I sold the cows to Hyson. There's enough for me and my folks for a while."

Defeat was in Brant's voice. He turned away abruptly.

Lavery knew how he felt. He had worked hard to build up this spread. Worn himself out, trying to make it the outfit he dreamed of. Proud of his

small success, dogged and determined in his failures. And now it wasn't his anymore. He was a broken man without any dreams to live for.

Jim Lavery went up the bath toward the ranch house. Two hands went by, carrying Brant's roll-top desk—the one he sat at, chewing the stub of his pencil, figuring the accounts. Lavery didn't speak to them. He went inside the building, almost stripped bare of furniture now, feeling the heaviness of the moment like a burden on his shoulders.

Gennie straightened as he came into the kitchen, leaving off packing cooking utensils in a box. Her brown hair was tangled and wild, as if blown by a wind and a thin smooch of soot ran down her cheek. She glanced at Lavery with damp eyes and reached up to push back a wisp of hair that had fallen over her forehead.

He said: "Gennie, we'll get Lazy Y back."

"I wish I could believe that."

He had never held her in his arms. Never kissed her. Now he went over and circling his arms about her waist, pulled her to him. "Believe me, Gennie," he said softly. "We'll get it back." Then he touched her lips with his.

IT WAS AS if he had never been alive until that moment. He wanted to remain that way always, with Gennie in his arms, her soft warm lips pressed against his. An excitement pulsed through him, forcing hot blood to his cheeks and charging his whole being with a new vitality. But she broke away, almost at once.

"Not now, Jim," she said sharply. "There's so much to do. These pots. And helping mother with the blankets."

He said gruffly: "I wanted you to know, Gennie."

"There's no time to think about myself. Or you."

"There will be."

"How do we know? A lot can happen."

He said: "A lot has." She picked up a pan and carried it over to the box. "I meant what I said, Gennie. I'll get Lazy Y back for your father. I'll make Hyson pay for what he's done. Your dad was good to me, and I don't aim to see him hurt."

She looked at him a moment, her wide eyes deep and grateful. "The good always get hurt. But I won't hold you to anything, Jim. It's better you forget what you said; it can only mean more trouble."

"I've had my share of trouble. I know what to expect."

"But what can you do?"

He ran a hand down along his thigh. He was feeling light in the head again, and it was throbbing like an angry drum; beating, beating, beating. But he knew what he could do to start. And it wasn't that the fever, or whatever got hold of him was making him loco.

He said in a flat voice: "One thing I can do, Gennie. I can kill Hyson."

- 2 -



BEFORE DAWN it began to rain, with a slow fine drizzle that felt soft and cool against Jim Lavery's burning face. The wagon was loaded now. Brant paid off his hands. Jim didn't want to take the

money, but Brant wouldn't listen to him. There was a little over a hundred dollars. Brant could use it better than he could. But Brant's stubbornness was born out of pride. He wanted things settled fair and square. Lavery admired that about him.

He sat in the doorway of the empty ranch house watching the wagon roll off in the first graying light. It was a

vague, blurred picture in the drizzle. Like a dream without reality. But full of a meaning that was far deeper than appearances. It caught something in Lavery and held him there, motionless and lonely with a growing bitterness.

The wagon disappeared into the rainy dawn, taking with it the Brants, their few possessions, and their hopes. Even the half dozen horses they had salvaged wouldn't be much use in the future. Lavery thought, he was still young, and he could have taken the misfortune and still have time to begin again. But Brant was past the time for beginning.

Brant should have let him stick with them. Maybe he could have been some use.

He seldom smoked, but now he rumaged in his pocket and pulled out a half empty sack of tobacco and began to build himself a cigaret, his long fingers working with concentrated attention.

He remembered the first day he had ridden up to the Lazy Y, looking for some chuck and a bunk for the night. That was three, maybe four years ago now. He had been riding hard, putting as much distance between himself and Santa Fe as he could, because you could never tell how far the law would reach. He'd decided that night he'd ridden enough for a while. The Lazy Y was far enough out of town so there wouldn't be many visitors. And he liked Brant, who asked no questions except that he put in a good day's work for his board and pay. He liked Mrs. Brant, too, and Gennie who was still a straggly youngster—who could ride like a boy and yet, at times, seem so feminine.

Maybe it was because he learned to trust them that they trusted him. Maybe because he was young enough to be the son the Brants had wanted but never had, that they had come to treat him more like one of the family than another hand.

But now bad times had come, and

Brant had paid him off. He didn't belong. He never had, really, although he had liked to think he did. And there was no reason he should. There was a past he never could shake. Never escape from. A past that would always keep him apart from decent folk like the Brants.

The cigaret burned down in his fingers. Lavery stood up, slowly, letting the smoke fall to the wet ground. The hollowness in him reached out, through him, leaving his body an empty shell.

He walked through the drizzle, his boots sucking at the sodden grass, over to the shed where he tied the pony Brant had left for him. He had rolled his few belongings in his poncho and lashed them to the saddle. You come off the trail, rest a while, then hit the trail again. *It doesn't pay to try to put down roots, he thought bleakly. It only makes it harder when you've got to pull them out again.*

Cinching up, the dizziness swept through him again. He straightened, feeling a rush of anger at himself. Then he fastened old Triggers' nag to his pony, looping the hackamore to his saddle horn.

The rain was cold and damp on his face as he began riding down the trail toward Dawling. He didn't look back at the Lazy Y, lying alone and silent against the range. You couldn't be always looking back; even when you couldn't see ahead very far, there wasn't any use in looking back.

AN HOUR before he reached Triggers' shack, Lavery was shaking from the fever that broke out in him. He rode slowly, his teeth chattering, feeling the clammy coldness of his wet clothes heavy against his burning skin.

The steady rocking of his pony's gait churned him up inside. It was only from long habit that he kept his seat. He had one dogged thought in his

whirling brain now. To return old Triggers' horse. After that he didn't know. Get Hyson, he supposed. He'd said he'd do that.

When he arrived at the shack, he slid off his saddle and stumbled over to the door with rubbery knees. The rain was coming down heavily now, driven by an increasing wind. It beat into his face, stinging his eyes. But it tasted good on his fever-cracked lips. With an effort he beat his fist on the door.

He heard no sound from inside.

He leaned against the door, suddenly feeling as if his legs would support him no longer. He felt curiously detached from everything around him, as if he didn't belong. A gust of wind whipped spray at him. It was getting hard for him to breathe.

How long he remained there, he didn't know. It seemed a long time. Finally he realized he had to do something. His trembling hand found the latch, worked at it for a while. Then the door swung open on creaking hinges. He staggered inside, the dry warmth coming at him with a comforting welcome. He managed to push the door closed behind him and for a moment he stood just inside, unsteadily, trying to brush away the wetness from his burning face.

The old man was on his bunk. He seemed to be sleeping.

"I brung back your horse," Lavery said. "Like I said I would."

The old man didn't answer.

Jim Lavery went over to the cook-stove. There was a pot of coffee steaming on it. He found a mug and poured himself some. He drank it without bothering to look for sugar or milk. The liquid scalded his throat. But it felt good, and he helped himself to more before he turned around and walked over to the bunk.

He looked down at the old man.

The mug fell from his fingers, splintered as it crashed on the floor.

Old Triggers was dead. He had been shot through the forehead, his sightless eyes stared up as if he were trying to see what lay behind the sky.

Lavery's first impulse, after pulling the threadbare blanket up over old Triggers' body, was to get away.

He felt as if some prank was being played on him, as if, somehow, any one who did him a good turn would be destroyed. There was a bitter taste in his mouth, and the pulse in his temples beat with an increasing rapidity.

Starting toward the door, he heard the rain slashing against the shack and he could see through the window the deep pools of water that had collected on the uneven ground. It wouldn't do himself or his horse any good to start out in the storm. Start out with no place to go.

But he had to rub the animals down, even though the task seemed too much to his fever-weakened limbs.

Glancing around the shack, he noticed now that the place seemed unnecessarily untidy. A box of supplies had been overturned, its contents scattered over the floor in one corner. A board in the floor had been pried loose and only partly replaced. Someone had hastily searched the shack. At that time, it didn't make sense to Lavery. He was more concerned with the horses.

Later, when he came in again after tending to the animals, his mind was in a torpor from fatigue. It had been a long time since he had slept, and the great weariness that deadened his whole being made any conscious effort impossible.

He took off his gunbelt, tossed it on the table and slumped down in a chair. For a few moments he looked at his hands, puckered from long exposure to the wet. His eyelids were heavy and the dull throb at the back of his skull kept up a steady monotonous rhythm that seemed to slowly blot out his surroundings.

Once he ran the tip of his tongue

over his cracked lips and he tried to tell himself he had to do something. But he didn't know what. And it didn't seem to matter.

After a little he could not keep the lids from closing over his eyes. His head fell forward across the table.

HE DID NOT know how long he slept. Or what roused him.

His head came up, abruptly, his body straightened and he sat stiff and quiet, every sense alerted. It was completely dark in the shack. There seemed to be no sound except the steady drive of the rain against the roof.

A long, silent moment passed.

Then he heard a sound he didn't want to hear—a man's voice calling out from outside the shack. Lavery pushed back the chair and got to his feet, feeling across the table for his gun belt. As he was hitching it around his waist, there was a sharp rap on the door.

Lavery moved quickly. Moved quietly across the floor to the wall beside the door and flattened his back against it. He waited, hardly daring to breathe, while the knock came again.

When there was no answer, whoever was outside pushed open the door and came in. He stood just inside, his frame a dark shadow in the night. The smell of the rain floated in through the open door.

Then a match sputtered, almost died, caught and flickered in the man's hands. He was back to Lavery. He was tall and thin with slightly stopped shoulders. He must have seen the table because he moved over to it, dropping the match to the floor. In a moment he had found the lamp and was lighting it.

Lavery could see the man's profile now. The thin long nose. The tight lips. The lashes over deepset black eyes which were sharp and thoughtful. His skin was a dead white.

He held the lamp up and began to

turn around, as if searching for something. He stopped as the lamplight picked out the form under the blanket on the bunk. Lavery could hear his heavy breathing.

His sixgun at his hip, Lavery said: "He's dead."

The man seemed to show no surprise. He swung around, facing Lavery, his eyes hooded a little. "You killed him?"

"Someone did. Not me."

"Why are you here, then?"

"Suppose you start off the talkin'. I got you at a disadvantage."

The man set the lamp down on the table again, moving with a casual lithe-ness. He said: "That depends on how you look at it. If I was scared of dy- ing, maybe so. But I ain't."

"No one wants to die."

"I used to think that. But what's so important about living?"

"Tomorrow, maybe."

The man laughed softly. "I wish I could be sure like you. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm here because this is my home. Or what home I have."

"Old Triggers' your father."

The man nodded.

"He's dead. Your father's dead. He did me a good turn, and I'm sorry."

"It's just as well. He wouldn't have wanted to see me," the man said now. "I helped kill him. Me and my brother. Not with bullets. Worse than that."

Lavery shoved his gun back in the holster. He came over and pulled out a chair. He could see now the resemblance to Hunt Triggers in this man. He didn't like seeing that, it brought back too much.

"Why would anyone want your father out of the way?" he asked. "Who would have done it?"

The deepset eyes fixed on Lavery, as if trying to read the secrets he had locked within him. "Why does anyone kill except in self defense? Greed or hate. I don't reckon anyone hated my old man. But my father had a lot of

money at one time. He was sitting on it, hoping it would help me out of a jam some day. If anyone knew that, they might have come looking for it."

Lavery's eyes shuttled around the room, remembering. "Someone has been looking for it," he said.

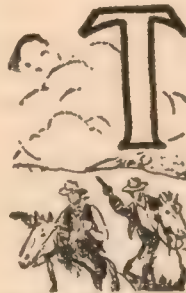
"They wouldn't have found it. Not here."

Lavery looked hard into the man's face. There was something about him he liked. He said slowly: "Your brother didn't know that. He didn't know your father had money."

"My brother was no good. It was better he didn't know."

Lavery ran a hand down the side of his face. He said slowly: "I know your brother was no good. Like you said, there are two reasons why a man kills. I hated your brother."

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HEY BURIED old Triggers the next morning. The two of them, Jim Lavery and the man who was Triggers' son and called himself simply Rondo.

After it was over, they didn't go back to the shack. There was no reason to. They rode up into the hills, damp and fresh-smelling after the rain. Sunlight sparkled on the shiny needles of the pinyons. Jim Lavery sat easily in his saddle, warmth baking into him, breathing the clear air and momentarily forgetting what lay behind him. When the sun was overhead, they halted to rest their mounts and eat.

"I'll be headin' back after this," Lavery said.

Rondo began to build himself a smoke. "I'll be back, too. But first I want to think. I need to be alone. Up in these hills."

"You want to find who killed your father?"

"I'll find him."

He said it as if it didn't matter.

"And the money your old man left?"

"I don't have no need for money."

Lavery had his cigaret finished. He lit it, drawing in the smoke slowly. "Wish I could say that."

Rondo was silent for a while. Then he said: "The thing I learned is that all I want is freedom. But no man can be really free. Not for very long. Yesterday I got out of the jailhouse. I'll never go back. And now for a few days in the hills I'll have what I really want. Then my own conscience will be my jailer. So I'll find out who gunned my father. You got your job to do. We may run into each other agin. Most likely not."

"About your brother..."

"Let's forget Hunt. I might have done what you did. If it had happened earlier, my father might not have found out about him."

He tossed away his smoke and stood up. The color was beginning to come back into Rondo's cheeks. Lavery thought, it was strange the way they had come together. Strange the bond that seemed to have drawn them together, when everything should have been otherwise. An easy, understanding relationship that needed no words to express it. "I'll ride on a piece with you," he said. "What I have to do kin wait."

"You better ride back now like you planned," Rondo said. "What I've got on my mind can't wait."

DRIED MUD caked the main street of Dawling as Jim Lavery rode in that afternoon. The boxed-in feeling returned, stronger than before, even, and he was tempted to ride on past the town, out into the wild emptiness that lay beyond. But he slowed his pony, knowing that he could not give in to his apprehension. If so, it would grow deeper and stronger until it ruled him

completely. A fear that had become his master.

Yet he thought, there in the plaza before the Longhorn, that if someone among the crowd thronging the plank sidewalk recognized him, all that he hoped to achieve would end in failure.

He dismounted stiffly, feeling strangely selfconscious and unsure of himself. No one seemed to pay him any heed. He brushed some of the trail dust from his levis and pushed his hat back on his head. Slowly he walked up the steps of the Longhorn, swinging his arms at both sides.

But he didn't find Tom Hyson inside, he didn't find the man who had stepped in to finish the fight. The bar was empty except for the new sheriff who was sitting by himself, playing solitaire at one of the tables. Sheriff Geiger was Hyson's man, Lavery had heard. Small, wiry, with thin lips that lay tight against his teeth, he glanced up briefly at Lavery, then back to his cards.

"Was lookin' for Hyson," Lavery said then, standing awkwardly just inside the bar entrance.

"Was you now?" The sheriff's voice was rough, as if there was sandpaper in his throat. "And why be you lookin' for Mr. Hyson?"

"Business. Personal business."

The sheriff looked at him again. Sharply this time. "You wouldn't be that boy Brant took on? Because if you is, I'd recommend you clear out of town before Mr. Hyson comes back. It would be a lot healthier for you."

"Thanks," Lavery told him.

He turned and went out, leaving the sheriff to his cards. Outside, he leaned against a rain barrel and made himself a smoke. Punchers, muleskinners from the trail, merchants from the town walked by—a few women, too. The stage came in, clattering to a halt before the express office, unloaded its passengers and mail and went rumbling on. The noise from *Freddie's* two doors down, grew louder as with the

approach of evening men pushed inside the batwings to wash the thirst of a day's work from their throats.

Lavery had hoped, in the parade that passed him, that he would see Hyson or Hyson's man. He didn't know what he would do. Perhaps nothing just then. Certainly, to draw and fire would have been madness. He could never have gotten away with it.

But he needed to find these men he hated. And when he did, he would know what the moment called for.

BY THE TIME twilight was closing in, he felt the rumble of hunger in his belly, and he walked a few paces down the board sidewalk and turned in at *Freddie's*. It was hot and smoky inside. He pushed through the crowd to the bar and ordered beer and hard-boiled eggs. He ate the eggs slowly, watching himself in the mirror across the bar. He thought, it was harder to be alone after you had tried to belong. As he had tried with the Brants. As he might have with Rondo, if Rondo had let him. There was a hollowness you didn't realize until afterwards.

He finished the eggs and beer and rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. For the first time he was conscious of the talk between the group of men at his elbow. He swung half around, startled as he heard Brant's name mentioned.

"Brant shouldn't have gone to Hyson," a red-faced man said. "There's easier money."

A tall man with stained whiskers spat on the floor. "Hyson hadn't shown his colors then. Now it looks like Tom Hyson aims to run the whole danged area. I reckon he figures he'll skin us all when he gits the chanct. Me, I stay good and clear of him."

"It's business," the red-faced man said. "Brant lost his his spread fair. But I feel bad for the man, havin' to move his family into that old Appleby place. If it was me, don't know if I

could of took it that way. And now Hyson's got the Brant spread up for sale. Just like that."

Lavery turned back to the mirror. Looked hard into his own brooding eyes. He ordered a whisky, drank it quickly, feeling it burn down his throat. Beside him the men had chanbed the subject, and were discussing a rash of rustling that had broken out to the north of town. Lavery wasn't interested. When he finished his drink, he pushed his way out into the night, glad to be clear of the noise and smoke.

He didn't know what to do, then.

He unhitched his pony and rode out of town. Up into the hills. He thought bleakly, like Rondo, he wanted to be alone. Wanted to forget.

For a long time he lay awake, rolled in his blanket, his head resting on the saddle, staring up into the star-filled night. He thought there was no solution. There was nothing he could do. With the sun he had best hit the long trail, because it wasn't any good sticking around where he would always be reminded of his own inadequacies.

Because he couldn't fullfill those rash promises he had made to Gennie. It had seemed, at the time, that he could. But he'd been mixed up; plenty mixed-up. You got to take yourself as you are, and he had better take it that he wasn't the hombre he liked to pretend he was.

FOR TWO days, he rode north, trying to pretend it was the right thing. He never quite succeeded in convincing himself. When he would halt, to rest his pony, he would look back over the trail he had travelled and he would feel the knot inside him drawing tighter. He had enough money in his jeans to carry him far. Wyoming, maybe. But money wasn't enough. You had to want to reach wherever you were going. His forehead would furrow, his big hands bunch at his sides, and he

would turn away abruptly from the back trail, grab his saddle horn and swing hurriedly into the saddle to kick his horse ahead. Up the steep mountain trail. Through the pine woods that gave way to scrub and naked rock. Riding into the wilderness that was as barren as his own thoughts.

He might have kept going. But it is sometimes small things that make a man see into himself clearly.

That first night in Krenshaw, his loneliness drove him to a saloon where he hoped to forget himself in the noise and crowds. For a while he sat alone at a table, a bottle and glass before him, watching the grimy, red-shirted miners and listening to the roar of their raucous laughter.

It didn't help. Even when the girl came over, resting her white hand on the back of the chair and smiling at him, he felt apart from everything, as if he didn't belong.

The girl had paint-reddened lips and curled lashes. Her eyes seemed amused. She said, "I like you, stranger."

Lavery wanted to tell her to go away, to leave him to himself. But he thought desperately that here was a chance to forget. He got up slowly and pulled out a vacant chair.

Later, he had drunk too much. He was with the girl; she had her arms around him and he could smell the heaviness of the perfume she was using. Her face was very close to his, so that he could feel the hot dampness of her breath against his cheek. It was like a dream, finding himself like this, and he shook his head, trying to clear it, conscious of the girl's body trembled against his.

He bent his head a little forward, thinking he wanted to kiss those flaming lips and he reached up with his arms to circle her and draw her even closer. He had never held a woman like that, never felt such desire rising within him. He felt his own breath coming faster, while a kernel of un-

easiness somewhere deep within him tried to warn him that this was somehow wrong. Because of what he felt about Gennie it was no good to let himself go.

His lips were against hers now. He could feel her heart beating against his own chest. There was nothing but raw passion between them. No love, no respect, no past and no future. Only a few moments of desire that had no meaning.

Abruptly Lavery broke away, rubbing the back of his hand across his lips as if that could wipe away the stain. He was remembering Gennie as she stooped over the crate to put into it one of the cooking pots so that it could be moved from Lazy Y. He remembered another kiss that night, sweet and awkward, yet full of meaning. And how he had stood there, full of self assurance, saying that he'd get Brant's ranch back.

The girl had backed off. Her hands were straightening her hair. The smile had gone out of her eyes, leaving them burning with anger. "You're nothing but a kid," she spat out contemptuously. "Leading a lady on that way... scared... like a mama's boy."

"Maybe you're right," he said softly. "Maybe it's time I grew up."

She was hurling abuse at him as he went out, slamming the door behind him.

Within the hour, Jim Lavery took the trail back to Dawling.

"**G**ENNIE." Her eyes widened as she saw him. She opened the door wider and stepped back so he could come in. Lavery noticed the faint smile that touched her lips, but also the hint of strain at the corners of her mouth. He followed her inside, his rowels clinking against the rough pine flooring.

As his gaze swept around the cabin, he thought this wasn't much of a place.

One big room, with a curtained alcove where Brant and his wife must sleep. A rusty cookstove at one end of the room. There were chinks in the wall near the roof, through which you could see daylight.

She seemed to read his thoughts. "It will do," she said.

He stood facing her, hat in hand, not knowing whether to draw out the wooden chair by the table.

"Your ma and paw?" he asked.

"Sit down, Jim. There's some coffee. Ma's gone into town. She'll be back before long."

He sat down while she went over to the stove. He watched her move, lithe and sure, feeling again the excitement she always stirred in him. She came back with two cups of coffee which she set on the table.

"You didn't mention your paw," he said.

Worry wrinkled her brown forehead. She looked down at the table, seemingly hesitant to speak.

Lavery said: "I feel like one of the family, Gennie. You kin tell me what's bothering you."

She gave a small sigh. "It's nothing, Jim; nothing you can put your finger on. Dad's out riding. He goes out every day, early. Before I wake up. He comes back after dusk. I suppose he rides over the old range. This business broke him up bad."

"It ain't easy for a man to give up all he's lived for."

Gennie looked up at him. He noticed the film over her eyes.

"And you?" he asked then.

She shrugged her shoulders. "There's not much money, Jim. Mr. Royce offered me work in the new saloon he's building."

"You couldn't do that..."

"Oh, I mean office work. Keeping the accounts. Writing letters. His offer is very generous."

Lavery stared moodily at the coffee. Gennie wouldn't like that. She wasn't

used to being cooped up. She belonged in the open, out on the range. But all he said was: "Who's this Royce?"

"You wouldn't know him, Jim. But he's interested in us and very kind."

The way she said it made the back of his neck burn. "Interested in you, maybe."

He was watching her closely so he noticed the slight flush that came into her cheeks. "Don't talk like that, Jim."

He shoved back his chair and got up. "Maybe best I be goin'," he announced, his voice coming from too deep inside him. "I got business to do."

She had risen also. The flush had gone, leaving her cheeks white. Lavery thought, Gennie was very tired. He hadn't noticed before how badly she looked.

"Don't get mixed up with Hyson," she said now, her tone thin and tight-sounding. "That's over, Jim. We'll make out from here."

"Sure," he answered.

He moved over to the door, reluctant to leave yet not knowing what else he could do. He heard the sound of a horse approaching and he hoped it wasn't Brant coming home, because he didn't want to see him just then.

But the steps outside the cottage were too rapid and heavy for the old man, and Lavery swung around to look at Gennie and he saw her face coloring again and he knew what was in her mind.

"Reckon I'm goin' to meet your friend," he said. "It will be a pleasure."

He waited, fingering the brim of his hat, while Gennie ran to the door. The anger in him was unreasonable. He tried to hold it down. But it made his forehead hot and constricted his throat and he was ready to hate the man Gennie brought inside.

But his hate was ready-made. Something old and violent.

"Jim, I'd like you to meet Mr. Royce," Gennie was saying.

Lavery stared into the face, and felt

icy water run through him. "We met before," he said. Royce was the man who had beat him up in the bar of the Longhorn, the man whose smirking face Lavery had seen as consciousness left him. The face that was familiar.

"Yeah, we met before," Royce said. "Twice. The first time was down near Santa Fe where I had a pard named Hunt Triggers."

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HE WAITED, hunkered down in the shade of some cottonwood, until Royce came out. He let Royce clamber on his pony and start out down the trail, wanting to wait until Royce was out of earshot

of the Brant cabin before he tackled him. There was no reason for Gennie to get mixed up in it. Enough that he, Jim Lavery, should take whatever happened on his own shoulders.

Swinging into his saddle, he followed Royce, keeping just far enough behind him to escape the trail dust Royce's mount kicked up. He rode like that for maybe ten minutes. The sun was sinking low against the western sky, tinting the thin string of clouds on the horizon with red and gold. Already there was the faint smell of night creeping into the air.

The trail circled abruptly, zigzagging back on itself as it began to descend to the floor of the valley at one end of which stood the town of Dawling.

Lavery turned his pony off the trail, up a bank of shale, and cut diagonally across country, hoping he could make the trail again before Royce came around the bend. Talus slopes skidded under his pony's hoofs as he came down to meet the trail. When he

reached it, he pulled up and swung around, his large brown hand going to the holster along his thigh.

He had his sixgun out, ready at his hip, when Royce rounded the bend at an easy trot. Royce sawed at his reins, bringing his pony up on its hind legs.

"Grab some clouds," Lavery ordered tightly.

Royce's horse squealed while its front legs came crashing heavily down. Royce dropped the reins and his arms went up slowly. His eyes bleak and hard.

"This ain't too smart," he said thickly as Lavery rode up to him.

Their horses together, now, almost touching, Lavery reached over and slid Royce's gun out of its holster. He tossed it into a clump of bushes by the side of the trail. "Now git down," Lavery said.

Royce threw a leg over his saddle and dropped to the ground. Lavery, his gun in hand, followed his movements with concentrated attention. When Royce had backed a short way up the trail, Lavery swung himself to the ground. He thought, it would be even, now. He could pay back Royce for the punishment he had received. But there were other things, more important. He said: "I'll save what I'd like to do till some other time. Right now, I want to know about Hyson."

Royce spat contemptuously. "I don't talk much, boy. It ain't my nature."

"You'll talk now. What's Hyson up to in these parts?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You're one of his men. You'd know."

"Maybe I'm simple."

Lavery felt anger rising in him. He stood rigid, balanced on the balls of his feet. He said in a low voice: "Another thing. You chummed around with Hunt Triggers. You might have an idea why Hunt's father was gunned."

In the growing twilight, he saw the flicker of Royce's eyelids, the sudden

twitch at the corners of his mouth. But it was only momentary, a quick fleeting instant of self-betrayal. So fleeting, that Lavery wasn't sure he wasn't imagining it.

"About Hunt Triggers," Royce said. "That Gennie Brant was sure interested in what I told her about Hunt. If I was you, I'd keep out of her way after this."

The suddenness of his exploding fury surprised Lavery. He took a pace forward, dropping his gun back into leather. Then he sprang at Royce, his blood pulsing wildly in his temples and his whole body charged with fury.

THE SHOCK of his fist slamming into Royce's mouth rocked him backwards. He dug his heels hard into the earth, breaking the momentum. Started toward Royce again, coming in low in a crouch. He lashed out with his right, but Royce weaved sideways and as Lavery twisted around to follow him, he saw that Royce was running for his horse. He started after him, came up just as Royce vaulted into the saddle. He reached for a leg but the heel of Royce's boot shot out and rowels raked the side of Lavery's face.

He reached up to his cheek instinctively, while the pain flashed out through him, felt the hot dampness of blood against his palm. At the same instant Royce had jammed his spurs cruelly into his pony's flanks. Hoofs thundered against the trail as his horse took off. Lavery's own pony shied away, leaving the trail clear.

He ran over, grabbed at his saddle horn while his toe found the stirrup. Blood was trickling down his chin, now, as he reined about to continue pursuit.

Wind cool against his burning face, he leaned forward and urged his pony on to greater speed. There was the hot madness of pursuit in him now, a reckless need to run Royce down, if it took

him a lifetime. He couldn't analyze it. He didn't want to. It was enough that some hard core of purpose had burst inside him so that it took possession of his whole being.

The settling dust was gritty in his eyes. The pounding of his pony's hoofs a rapid syncopated accompaniment to his own pounding heart. The deepening darkness closing around him a countermelody to his own mood.

He would have killed Royce that night. Killed him without the quiver of a nerve. Without a twinge of mercy.

He did not see the riderless horse, standing athwart the trail, until he almost rode him down. He had to wheel abruptly, turn his own pony half around, while leather creaked protestingly, the muscles in him strained, and his pony reared.

He heard the moan, then. He dismounted, moved cautiously toward the sound, wondering if this were some ruse that Royce was trying. In the early darkness, he could just see the figure stretched prone at the edge of the trail.

Reaching for a match, he dropped down on one knee beside the figure. He struck a light, held it in his cupped hand. Eyelids fluttered at the sudden light, came open though they were glazed with pain. The figure tried to move, struggling to find some strength that wasn't there.

"I ain't finished yit." Old Brant said with great effort. "I saw it. Five hundred head. . . I'm too tough for you to do it."

"I ain't doin' you in, Brant. I'm Jim Lavery."

The eyes stared up at him. Fluttered again. There was a fleck of foam at the corner of Brant's mouth. A shiver went over his thin body. The match sputtered, burned Lavery's finger. "You look like Jim." Brant's voice was like paper being crumpled. "But I know who you be, Hyson. But I'm too tough. You'll never kill me."

Lavery had seen the dark stain soaked into the front of Brant's shirt. "I'm takin' you home Brant."

"No. Leave me be. I ain't got no home, any more."

But he didn't struggle as Lavery picked him up and carried him over to his horse. He lashed the old man into the saddle. Brant was still talking. About five hundred head. About the Box Canyon. It didn't make sense.

When Lavery led the pony up to the Brant cottage, the old man had slumped into unconsciousness. He died just as the dawn was breaking.

JIM LAVERY felt a flat emptiness lying heavy in the pit of his stomach. Old Brant had been a friend; like the father he had never known. His gaze shuttled back and forth, across the faces of the two women now staring blank-eyed, numbed by the tragedy of what had befallen them. In the gray light of early morning, their features had a ghostlike unreality.

Without saying anything, he moved over to the window and stood there, watching the sun come up over the range below. Part of that range was Lazy Y grass. The land Brant worked so hard for and lost.

He heard a movement behind him, and then Gennie had come over and was standing beside him. She pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen over her forehead. "Why, Jim?" she asked tonelessly. "Why this, now?"

He wished he could answer her question. Wished he could call up some deeper understanding of life and death so that he could give her the comfort she needed. He shifted his weight and looked deep into her questioning eyes, bitterly conscious of his own inadequacy. "It was his time," he said.

But he didn't believe that. Brant had been murdered. Cut down before his time.

"There was no reason."

He didn't tell her. It was better she didn't know. Not then, anyway. Instead, he turned away. "I'll be seeing the sheriff," he said. "I want you and your ma to count on me. Like I belonged."

He heard her sharp intake of breath and then she said: "We'll be all right. Royce will give me that job."

"You're not going to work for Royce, Gennie," he said with sudden harshness. "He's no good. 'Specially for you."

He could sense her anger. Color came back into her drawn cheeks. Her body stiffened. "Coming from you, that doesn't sound right, Jim. We're grateful for what you've done. Ma and me like you, maybe too much. But we'll make out alone. Without your help."

Her words were a body blow, driving the breath out of him. He reached out, unbelieving, and tried to take her hand. But she backed away from him.

He called her name, softly: "Gennie."

Her eyes swam at him. For a moment he thought she was going to break down, give way to the grief she had kept so long under control.

"No, Jim," she said at length, her voice strained as if she were trying to keep it from breaking. "Let's not pretend. Royce told me about what happened before we knew you. I don't want to believe it, but it must be true. Otherwise, why...?"

She broke off. Looked at him desperately. Hoping he would deny it.

He said: "It's true, Gennie. I killed a man. I had to kill him."

She stared right past him. "You never have to kill anyone, Jim."

"This time I did."

She turned. Her shoulders heaved. But her voice came out clear and firm. "You better not come back, Jim. I couldn't bear it if you came back."

HE FOUND Sheriff Geiger in the bar at the Longhorn. There was a man Lavery didn't know with him. A tall man, dressed in black with white hair. The Deacon, Geiger called him. They were playing double solitaire, and there was a half empty bottle on the table between them. Geiger wiped a spot of whisky from the table with his cuff and without looking up from the cards said: "You didn't take my advice, boy."

Lavery found his hands bunching at his sides. "I'm reporting a killing, Sheriff," he said, trying to keep his voice level. "It's your job to do something about it."

"Brant." Geiger remarked. "Drilled through the chest. What do you think, Parson?"

"Could of happened anywhere," the man in the black suit said. "Not even in your territory."

"He was gunned in your territory," Lavery said savagely. "By Tom Hyson."

There was a moment of silence. The sheriff put a queen on a jack. "Hyson ain't around. You talk wild for a youngster. You should of learned some manners."

"You can't expect manners from a no-good killer," a voice said from behind.

Lavery knew that voice belonged to Royce. He turned around, saw Royce standing in the door to the bar, with Hyson behind him. He felt a trickle of cold sweat dribble down from his forehead. The room was very quiet, too quiet, as if everyone was waiting for something to happen. Instinctively, Lavery's hand began inching down along his thigh.

"Not this time," Royce said coldly. His holster swivelled up, finger around the trigger. A gunslick's weapon, for shooting through the holster tip before a man could draw.

Lavery could feel all eyes in the

room drilling him. There was no friendliness, no pity. Only calculated distrust.

The sheriff stood up, came around the table and took off Lavery's gun belt. Royce and Hyson came into the room. A fly, buzzing around, lighted on the table where the liquor had been spilt.

"Better run this killer in," Royce said. "You'll find he's wanted down below."

"We kin use him here," Geiger said. "There's been too much shootin' lately. First that old feller Triggers disappeared. Done in for his money, likely. And now, Brant."

Lavery said sharply: "You got it all figured nicely, Sheriff. How big does Hyson pay you off?"

"I don't like killers around," Hyson said, then. He had gone over to the bar and was pouring himself a drink.

"What do you think, Deacon?" Geiger asked. "Mr. Hyson don't like killers around."

The Deacon picked up the deck of cards and ruffled them. "I don't think Hyson need fret," he said in his rusty voice. "This killer ain't going to be around long."

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HERE WAS a wooden bench in the cell. Jim Lavery lay stretched out along the bench, his big hands laced behind his head, his eyes wide open, staring at the corrugated iron roof. His body was tight, nervous,

tensed to the point where he felt any movement would snap every fibre in him. The strain made him clamp his teeth together. He could feel the pull of muscles along the back of his legs. His face was shiny with sweat.

They had brought him here a long time ago. When it was still morning. No one had brought him food. But the cramp of hunger had passed.

He figured before long it would be dark. He wished he could go to sleep. It would make the time pass quicker, if he could sleep. But the tenseness in him made that impossible. As it did any constructive thinking.

He could only go over in his mind in choppy, unconnected thoughts, the crazy welter of events that had come to a head with his being thrown in the jailhouse. They made no pattern to him. Brant, the Lazy Y, Rondo, Genevieve, Hyson, Royce, Hunt Triggers. Many persons, many events connected with them.

Suddenly he found himself on his feet and he ran over to the bars of the cell and grabbed them with his fists and tried to pull them apart, as if he were some Samson whose strength could bring the roof down over his head. The iron bars were solid, unyielding, and they only burned his palms and left him exhausted so that when he left off, he had to sink down on the floor and bury his face in his hands, gasping for breath.

It was then he heard the stamp of feet approaching, and he got up and moved over in the darkness to the bench and sat there heavily, while a lantern flashed in his face and Royce said: "He's lookin' some tamed."

The sheriff was there too, because Lavery heard him grunt and answer curtly. Lavery did not look at them.

"It would be easier here," Royce said then.

"I told you it ain't a good idea. The townfolks might start checkin' if there was a racket. We'll do like we planned."

A key grated in the lock. Lavery heard the cell door creak open. He stood up now. The lantern light hurt his eyes. Rising on the balls of his feet,

he waited, blinded by the light but gauging by sound their approach.

"Better hold your hands over your head, Lavery," the sheriff ordered. "We can't be taking chances with you."

Lavery didn't obey. He waited another moment. Then he judged the sheriff was close enough. He started to lunge forward.

An arm came around his neck, a knee jammed in the small of his back. It felt as if his spine was cracking in the middle.

"Easy," Royce's voice hissed close by his ear.

Lavery tried to struggle free. Something slammed against his temple. His body went suddenly limp. That moment he felt his arms wrenched down and back, while bone scraped in his shoulder sockets. He went forward onto his knees, a sharp blazing pain exploding before his eyes.

"Git up," Royce said tightly, and he was pulled to his feet. His hands were tied behind his back, now, and although his temples were throbbing, his head cleared a little.

He stood there, swaying, seeing the hot dark faces of the sheriff and Royce watching him. The lantern had been set on the floor. Its light cast long shadows against the wall.

"You kin save us trouble," Royce was saying. "We might even make a bargain. All we're lookin' for is old Triggers' cache. You kin tell us where it is, or where you hid it out. Then we might give you a break."

"You got things figured wrong. I don't know anything about any cache Triggers had."

He saw the hand flick out. Knuckles slammed the side of his face, snapping his head around. "Think agin, Lavery. You chummed with Hunt. You turned up at the old man's place."

But the sheriff was pulling Royce back. "Stow it fur now," he said. "Let's

git movin'. The Deacon don't like to be kept waitin'."

Royce turned away reluctantly. He picked up the lantern. The sheriff told Lavery to move out after Royce.

They waited inside the door of the jailhouse until a group of riders passed. Then they went out. Hoisted Lavery on horseback and took off down the night trail, Royce in the lead, the halter of Lavery's pony fast around his saddle horn, Sheriff Geiger to the rear. The night air was cool and refreshing against Lavery's burning face. The stars had come out, clear and bright against the black sky. A lazy new moon was riding low against the horizon.

Lavery knew before long where they were taking him. He knew, too, what awaited him when they reached old Triggers' shack. But he didn't know the answer these men thought he knew. He couldn't even bluff his way out. Ice formed along his spine, and he did not even notice the pain in his swollen wrists or the dull thud in his skull for knowing what was going to happen.

THE DEACON was waiting for them. He had a bullwhip over his shoulder as he came out of the shadows to greet them. Royce stripped off Lavery's shirt. They tied Lavery's wrists up over his head to a beam and bound his ankles together with a strip of rawhide. Behind him he heard the swish of the bullwhip, then a snap as the thong flicked out. He felt the air stir as the tip barely missed his naked shoulder.

"Jes to show you, I got a knack with this thing," the Deacon said. "Now, unless you want a real demonstration, it's time you did some talking."

He was afraid, desperately afraid. His throat was dust-dry, his stomach churning with an unnerving nausea. He could feel the sweat oozing from his pores. He said, not sure he wasn't speaking the truth: "I'd tell you if I knew."

The bullwhip swished again. Reached out hungrily to rip a sliver of flesh from Lavery's back. It was a biting, unbearable pain, that set his teeth grinding together. He tried to tear his arms free. Someone laughed.

"He don't like it," Geiger said.

The whip slashed again. This time drawing a line of pain across Lavery's bare back. It seared like a branding iron. Sent a shock of agony along every nerve. He thought he couldn't take any more.

But it came again, and again.

Then, in between lashes, he heard Royce demanding with irritating insistence: "Where's Triggers' money?"

Lavery could only shake his head. He tried to stiffen himself, to be ready for the next lash. But when it came, he wasn't ready. You never could be.

His brain was swimming now. The sky was rocking above him. The ground tipping crazily. Whirling stars danced in the dark sky. He felt the weight of his body dragging at the bonds around his wrists and he tried to call out. Make them realize he couldn't tell them what they wanted to know. But no sound could push through his swollen throat.

He was too far gone to wince at the next crack of the whip. The sound came to his ears like some dull, far-away explosion. Blackness rolled before his eyes. And then briefly he was seeing Gennie, that night back at the ranch house. But she faded away, altho he tried to hold her there in his vision, and he was caught instead in a roaring holocaust of flames and he tried to struggle to escape while the fire licked eagerly around his body.

HE DIDN'T know how long it had gone on. Or when it was over. But he was vaguely conscious of someone cutting his wrists free and he would have collapsed except for the strong hands that held him up.

He felt himself being dragged across the ground and he tried to shake his head to clear his brain while an oddly-familiar voice said quietly: "Pull yourself together, pard. While we got time."

He was on a horse, moving through the night, keeping his saddle only out of long habit. He could make out dimly the outline of the rider ahead, tall and thin, crouched forward as if the weight of his shoulders was too much for him to carry. That would be Rondo, Lavery thought, but he was still too close to the border of unconsciousness to understand.

Later, Rondo would tell him that he had heard of Lavery's arrest, gone to the jailhouse to find Lavery not there and, picking up two friends, had followed sign in the night until he had surprised the trio of torturers.

Just then, all Lavery knew was that he must follow Rondo. His body was numb, his limbs loose and nerveless, his naked back raw with a burning pain. He gripped the saddle horn with fingers that had no strength, while his head rolled dizzily with each jog. If his mount had stumbled, Lavery would have gone crashing to the ground.

They rode for a long time. Through a night that never ended. The only sound the creak of leather and the steady thud of hoofs on the trail. Like riding in a bad dream you can't awake from, even though you know sometime it must end.

Rondo sat on his heels, staring moodily into the campfire he had built. Lavery watched him, wondering what secrets lay locked up in the thin, silent man who had come from nowhere when he needed him most.

It was late afternoon, the sun already low in the cloudless sky. Nearby their two ponies munched at tufts of grass, and you could hear the rush of the stream that tumbled down from the hills above. Rondo had picked this spot well, a retreat protected by out-

crops of solid gray rock and a heavy growth of trees that had given Lavery shelter from the sun during the day while he slept restlessly.

Lavery stood up slowly, feeling the pull of knitting flesh across his back. Stiffly he moved over to the fire, buttoning the faded shirt Rondo had given him from his warbag.

"Don't reckon I told you how I appreciate you're showin' when you did," he said, embarrassment making his voice husky.

Rondo didn't look at him.

"You weren't in a talkin' way. Anyhow, it ain't necessary."

Taking off his hat, Lavery ran fingers through his hair. He said awkwardly: "I gunned your brother. I could of gunned your father, too."

"We been through that before. I buy you at your face value. I don't make mistakes often."

Lavery watched Rondo add a dry stick to the fire.

"I rode with Hunt for a while down below. He was older than me—nearer your age. I sort of looked up to him at first. But things kept comin' up. Things I didn't like. He beat up a feller who'd taken us in and fed us once. Once he cut the throat of a stray puppy because he didn't like the way it whined. The pup was just hungry. But it all came to a head over the girl."

"You don't have to spell it out."

"I guess I want to. Hunt made a big play for this girl. She was a Mexican kid. Big brown eyes and black hair that used to shine like it was polished in the sunlight. She loved your brother, thought he couldn't do any wrong. And she came to him this day, her big eyes wide and full of happiness because she was going to give Hunt a baby. I was there. I saw it. When she told him, Hunt went all crazy, calling her names. And when she held out her arms to him, because she didn't understand, he slammed his fist into her face and knocked her to the ground. When she

tried to get up, he kicked her. That's when I pulled my gun. I had to, because she was just a Mexican, and the sheriff in those parts looks at it that whatever happens to a Mexican don't count. So I shouldn't have drawn."

He stopped. He heard Rondo's heavy breathing and the crackle of the fire.

Lavery asked desperately: "Should I have pulled my gun then, Rondo?"

He watched the thin shoulders shrug. "How should I know?" Rondo said. "I'm not God."

"But your old man wasn't bad, Rondo. I know who killed him."

"I know, too."

"You're goin' to get Royce, Rondo?"

Again the heavy breathing. The crackle of the fire. In the west the sun was a flat disk of crimson. "Guns don't necessarily solve everything," Rondo said at length. "Maybe, it's better that Royce live."

Lavery sucked in his breath sharply. He didn't understand this man; he was a little afraid of him, now. He turned away, looking up at the tree-tops cutting a jagged line into the sky. He thought, if he'd known his father, he wouldn't have felt that way. He'd have wanted to get the killer of his old man. Make him pay quick.

He heard Rondo getting up, his boots scraping against gravel.

"When you was sleeping," Rondo said, "you were mumbling something about a box canyon. It weren't very plain."

"Brant was talking about a canyon. He found something there. That was why he was murdered."

"A canyon on his spread?"

"You mean what used to be his spread."

Rondo cleared his throat. "When you're fit, we'll take a look-see."

Lavery swung around. Stood facing him. His arms hung at his side, fingers bunched. "I'll handle it alone," he said then. "I got no stomach for chummin' with a coward."

He was sorry he said it. But it was

true, he thought fiercely. Rondo wasn't going after Royce. A man should get the hombre who shot down his kin.

"Maybe you're right," Rondo said quietly. "But I figured I ought to have a gander, seein' as yesterday I bought the Brant spread from Tom Hyson."

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FERIOUSLY, Lavery urged his pony on. Down the steep trail, the night close and hot around him. He was unconscious now of the stiffness of his body. Of the strips of soreness across his back.

He was angry at himself because of Rondo. It was true, Rondo had saved him when he was half dead from torture. But Rondo was a broken man, without the guts to go after the man who had killed his father. He had boxed Lavery in, too, buying the Lazy Y from Ben Hyson, making it impossible for Lavery to fulfill his promises to Gennie.

The anger throbbed and pulsed, churning in his middle, like a disease, drawing the skin tight across his cheekbones. Perhaps it was because still, deep down, he wanted to like Rondo. That made the betrayal more intense.

With a savage jerk, he reined the pony around a bend in the trail.

He had left Rondo without a word, flinging himself on his saddle and heading down-trail at a gallop. He wished now he had told Rondo how he felt. It would have been easier than keeping this surging fury bottled up within him.

But in a way, Rondo had opened up to Lavery a part of himself. He could see, now, with an ugly clarity, that there was no longer time for temporizing, lest he, like Rondo, come to find he had gone soft. He had boasted

to Gennie that night. But he would make good his boast to avenge Brant. It was more compelling now, since Brant had been killed. Because of Brant's kindness to him, he would do the job Brant's women-folk could not do. And he would do Rondo's job, too. Because old Triggers had been good to him.

These things were important. The law no longer meant anything. It was Tom Hyson's law only; to protect Hyson's interests and the savageness of his gunmen.

His careening mount half-stumbled, caught itself, plunged on. Lavery could smell the sweat from the lathering flanks. He felt a moment of pity for the laboring beast beneath him. This was none of his pony's business. Yet it would run until its heart burst because the man astride him demanded it. Lavery pulled in suddenly, knowing he must allow his horse some rest.

He thought, that like his pony, he was in the grip of something larger than himself. He had never understood it before. Especially in those early days, before he had come to Brant's. Perhaps for that reason, it was now all the plainer to him. It was his obligation to others that drove him. When you cease living for yourself, you assume those obligations. It was part of belonging. And unless you belonged, you had nothing.

When he took off again, he rode more quietly. He would get done what he had to do soon enough. But the violent anger was burned out of him. He sucked in the fresh morning air, taking it deep into his lungs, sure of himself now for the first time.

It was almost noon before he reached the Brant place. Leaving his pony to nibble at a patch of grass, he walked up to the cabin straight and square-shouldered, his arms swinging easily at his sides. Gennie saw him and came running out, her hair tossing around her ears, her dress swirling.

"I heard you've been jailed, Jim," she said breathlessly. "What happened? Royce wouldn't tell me."

He looked into her eyes, wide and troubled. He wanted to fold her to him, but he shoved his impulse aside. "Gennie. I'll need a gun. And something to eat."

Her cheeks went white. He said gently: "I just want to pay back my debt to your father. Something is going on at the ranch. I don't know what. But I'll find out. Tom Hyson is mixed up in it; Royce, too."

She was staring at him, as if terrified. Her lips started to move.

He went on, his eyes turning bleak and far-away: "I'm not a killer, Gennie. Believe me, what happened had to. I'm not shooting now unless it comes to that. Unless there isn't any other way out."

She was wanting to believe him. He could tell by the way she looked at him. The color began to come back into her cheeks. And her fingers stopped working nervously. "You say Royce is mixed up in this," she said. Her voice was firmer.

Lavery nodded.

"He asked me to marry him, Jim. I...I said I would."

HIS BREATH left him. His nerves abruptly jerked tight.

"I had to say that. Mother isn't well. There's no money."

"Just give me a little time," Lavery said slowly. "Gennie, you've got to."

"I'll give you time, Jim."

"Your father's killer will pay," he went on flatly.

"Why do you take this on, Jim? It isn't your business."

He answered slowly: "I never knew my own father. He disappeared back before I remember. My mother died when I was seven. I just kicked around—a mixed-up kid, until I come to Lazy Y. I guess I grew up there. So I reckon this is my business."

Later, as he was eating, he told her

what Brant had said about the box canyon. He told how he had overheard the talk in *Freddie's* about the cattle losses to the north. He didn't tell her about what had happened at Triggers' shack, or about Rondo.

There was fire in Gennie's eyes now. She reminded Lavery now of her father, but with the fight still there. "I know what canyon dad must have meant," she told him, her jaw set. "Jim, I'm going with you."

He didn't say anything right away.

Mrs. Brant moved around like a shadow, as if she didn't hear or see them. She would need attention. Grief had made her numb.

"This is man's work, Gennie," Lavery said then.

Gennie tossed her head. Lavery felt a pride in this girl. She had something he admired—courage, vitality and determination. "I'm a Brant," she answered sharply. "This is Brant work."

But he would not let her come with him. She watched him ride off, her eyes dark and grim, her slender body drawn up straight as a cottonwood.

HE CUT INTO Lazy Y range, following the directions Gennie had given him. He rode cautiously, searching the range for sight of other riders, keeping his pony to the valleys. He felt his senses keenly alert, as if they had been sharpened for this moment, knowing that if he were discovered or made a wrong move, he might never get another chance. Royce would soon enough know that old Triggers' cache had been used by Rondo to buy the Lazy Y. A bullet in the back would be the easiest way to get rid of Lavery. No one cares much when a killer is drygulched.

Ahead, the hills were closer. He could make out the cliff of rock which Gennie had said would indicate the entrance to the canyon. You wouldn't suspect from this distance there was any opening in the hills. Lavery cut

west, angling to come up to the canyon from under the cover provided by the tree-clad slopes of the hills. The bunch grass brushed his stirrup boots.

It was then he first caught sight of the other rider. He saw the dark figure on horseback break out on the top of a rise, then disappear in a dip. Lavery drew up and waited, eyes squinting against the sunlight, for the other rider to reappear.

Five minutes passed. Then the rider showed again, closer this time, coming along a ridge at right angles to Lavery, as if heading directly toward the mouth of the canyon.

Lavery cursed silently, not knowing as yet whether the rider was aware of him, but realizing that it would be only a matter of time before he was discovered.

The mounted figure was rapidly growing larger. Riding fast, and taking little effort to keep from being seen. Lavery thought, the meeting had best take place under conditions most favorable to himself. He began riding up the valley again, his eye constantly scanning the range, plotting the meeting so that the other would have the sun in his eyes as they came into shooting distance.

But it became suddenly apparent that the other had sighted him. The rider wheeled around, came loping through the grass toward Lavery. Lavery drew up, forehead creased, and reached toward his holster. Something about the approaching rider disturbed him. It was like a memory returning out of the past. Not yet clear and formed, but familiar.

The rider disappeared behind a crest of range. Broke suddenly much closer. Lavery swallowed hard, his lips going tight as he kicked his horse up out of the valley. He came up close to the rider before he could actually believe what he saw.

"I told you not to come, Gennie," he said gruffly.

Gennie Brant swung her sorrel around so that she was facing Jim Lavery. There was amusement flashing in her dark eyes. "A woman has a right to change her mind," she said lightly.

She was wearing levis and a flannel shirt, open at the throat. She had pushed her hair back under her wide-brimmed Stetson. A gunbelt was slung about her narrow waist.

Lavery's big right hand went to his chin. "You're going back. Right now," he told her harshly. "I've got enough on my hands, without worryin' about you."

She seemed to rise a little in her saddle. "I'm finding out what's going on in that canyon whether you like it or not." Her voice rose defiantly. "If you don't want me around, I'll go on alone."

He glanced at her silently, knowing she meant what she said, while he slowly admitted defeat. "There could be real trouble, Gennie," he remarked after a moment.

"It would be better if there were two, then."

He didn't like it. But there wasn't anything he could do about it.

He shrugged. "A woman don't have no right to be so stubborn."

"A man either," she told him.

THE ANSWER was there, in the canyon below. Maybe six hundred head of cattle, huddled in tight bunches. At one end, by the hastily constructed shelter and shed, a half-dozen men were busy running brands. You could hear the bawl of the cows, almost smell the burning flesh.

Gennie's fingers clutched Lavery's arm. She whispered tensely: "We got to get help. The sheriff. . ."

"Hyson's man. But we'll get help, Gennie. This is a big deal."

He felt a little finger of fear sliding under his skin. Was this tied up to Hyson? Could they round up help in

time? Without the law to back them up, there might be trouble. And Hyson would fight back. Hard. He had too much to lose.

They had better get away quickly, before there was any chance of their being discovered. For himself it didn't matter so much. But for Gennie. . .

He whispered to her, and they began crawling back through the bushes to where they had left their horses. Lavery didn't know how this would work out. He could only sense that what they had found increased their danger.

Reaching the clearing, he stood up, brushing dried leaves from his levis. Their ponies a little way off were close together nuzzling each other. Behind him he heard Gennie breathing heavily. He turned and searched her face for a moment, regarding the slight quiver of her nostrils, the clean pattern of her cheek bones, the smooth brownness of her skin. Her red lips seemed very full.

"This is why Hyson was so eager to close down on Dad," she said softly. "Why he shot him."

"Yeah, this is why."

In the silence between them, Lavery could hear the faraway sound of the cattle. For an instant they seemed lost there, the two of them, caught between the sky and earth.

He took a step forward, hesitated, then reached out and circled Gennie with his strong arms. Held her slender body against him while his lips pressed hers, gently at first, then with increasing hunger.

Slowly she seemed to melt into his being. And then, fiercely, she was returning his embrace.

He had never known a moment like this. It was as if every cell in his body had become alive. A pulsing music sang through him, and he was conscious of nothing except that they had come to understand at last what was between them. It was a moment that

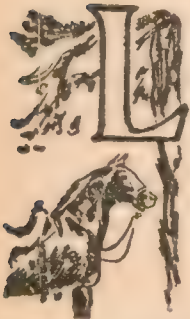
could go on, endlessly, spinning off into the reaches of eternity.

He did not hear the crackle of bushes behind him. He only felt Gennie's body suddenly grow rigid, and then she broke away from him while the blood slowly drained from her face. Then he heard the movement.

He swung around, tugging at his gun. He was too slow.

Royce, standing flat-footed just inside the screen of bushes, grinned at him. There was a sixgun in each hand. "I didn't know the future Mrs. Royce was so passionate." Royce said with a smirk. "But I reckon from now on, she'll save it for her husband."

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LAVERY heard Gennie's scream as he dived forward. A gun blasted tearing the air with its reverberation. The slug caught him in his right shoulder, just as he was freeing his own weapon.

The impact swung him half around. Staggered him. His brain swirled with a wild madness. He steadied himself, rocked sideways and came around again, facing Royce. But he saw now that Gennie had moved in between them and the forefinger curled around his gun trigger went suddenly nerveless.

"Out of the way," he ordered hoarsely.

"No! No!" Gennie cried shrilly. "There's been too much bloodshed."

She stood there, slim and purposeful, her wide eyes shuttling back and forth between Lavery and Royce.

The madness left Lavery. He felt defeated. Sensing perhaps what was to come.

"Mr. Royce," Gennie said then, "there's only one condition on which

I'll marry you. That is if no harm comes to Jim Lavery."

Royce moved a little to one side. Lavery saw him spit out of the corner of his mouth. He let his guns drop loosely to his side. "He's dangerous," Royce said. "A crazy kid. Gun crazy."

Her voice was firm. "I said that's the condition."

Lavery thought, if he went for Royce now, Gennie might get hurt. Yet it was hard to control himself. He knew Gennie was doing this for him. The pressure of her lips only seconds before had told him she loved him, not Royce. He couldn't let Gennie sacrifice herself that way. In his temples, hot blood beat rapidly.

It would be better to let Royce take him. Then Gennie wouldn't be bound by any promise. He shoved his gun back into leather and said between tight teeth: "You're not marrying Gennie, Royce. I'm goin' to see to that."

He began running then. Making toward his pony. The ground hard and uneven under his boots. The bullet hole in his shoulder stabbing pain.

He expected the shot to come at any moment. He was giving Royce that chance. He tried to steel his nerves for the moment. For the shock of driving lead that would rip open.

But the shot didn't come.

Lavery halted suddenly, realizing Royce wasn't going to open up on his fleeing figure. The realization twisted his guts out of shape.

Then two riders came crashing through the woods, crying out hoarsely, and he looked around to find Sheriff Geiger and the Deacon riding down on him.

He heard Royce call out to them, telling them not to shoot, and then, as if rooted to the spot, Lavery waited, trying to make sense out of all this while Geiger fell off his pony and came toward him, on the run.

Geiger took Lavery's gun. Pushed

him roughly over to where Royce stood stroking the butt of one of his Colt's. A little way off Gennie watched, her shoulders slumped, her face white and drawn. Momentarily Lavery caught her eyes. He tried to wink at her. Make her think this wasn't as bad as it appeared. Her hand went up to her throat, and then she looked away.

"This feller is trouble," Geiger said to Royce. "Hyson won't like it."

The Deacon, thin and hollow-cheeked, leaned forward in his saddle. A gust of wind bollowed the folds of his black coat. "Reckon the sheriff is right. We ought to finish him off."

Royce said impatiently: "I made a bargain. I kin straighten it out with Hyson."

THEY HELD Lavery in the shed. He could hear the sounds of work going on outside. The squeal of the cows as red-hot-iron seared their hide. The curses of the men. Sometimes the hoofs of horses as riders passed. He lay on the floor, like a sack of flour, trussed with long strips of rawhide that cut cruelly into his flesh. His shirt was matted against his shoulder with dried blood from the wound that now throbbled with a livid intensity.

No one came near him throughout the remainder of the day. Only after darkness had fallen did he hear the grate of the door and then the rays of a lantern flashed in his eyes. He blinked, trying to see who had come in.

"Get him up," Royce said sharply.

Boots shuffled across the dirt floor. Someone bent over him. He felt the pressure relax as a knife cut the rawhide. Lavery twisted stiffly, finding it hard to move his cramped limbs. He managed after a bit to push himself up. The light blurred before his eyes.

He could only make out the shadow of the man who had released him, but when the man spoke he recognized the shadow and the voice. "We got to work fast, Royce. If they got to

Hyson, he might be due any time."

Lavery's cracked lips moved. He said: "Rondo."

Rondo seemed not to hear him. Royce had moved up close. He set the lantern down on the dirt floor. The light threw long shadows against the wall. "Here," Royce said, shoving a stub of pencil and a scrap of paper at Lavery. "You write what I tell you."

Lavery took the pencil. His fingers closed around it. "Give him something to write on," Royce suggested.

Rondo searched a moment, handed Lavery a piece of pine board.

"Date it two weeks from now," Royce went on. "The twenty-seventh or something."

"You better let me handle this," Rondo said quietly. "Put on the top, 'Nogales, September One'. Then write, 'Dear Gennie'."

Lavery tried to form the letters. He was trying to figure out what this meant.

"Got it. Then go on. 'I reached the border last week. All is well. I will always love you, but I will never be back. Then sign it.'"

Royce gave a soft hiss. "I don't like that," he said truculently. "It will make her remember too much."

"Write it like I said," Rondo directed, his voice soft and even.

Slowly Lavery formed the words. He wanted to be sure he was safe before she married Royce. This letter he was scribbling would be the assurance she would wait for. With that letter, Royce could kill him and still have it look as if he had filled his promise.

He looked up into Rondo's face. There was no emotion in it. Lavery felt a chill run over him. Rondo had teamed up with Hyson and Royce. He might have suspected something like that would happen.

He had finished the message, but now Lavery paused. This note would throw Gennie into Royce's arms, and he was not going to do that. He tore the paper into bits.

"That won't work," Rondo said, coldly now. "Better to have you write it yourself. But if not, there are other ways."

Royce stepped in, started to bring up his fist.

"He'll write it," Royce said.

Rondo pushed him back. "Like I said, it isn't necessary. Let's get moving. I want this finished before morning."

"You kin handle it alone?" Royce asked.

Rondo said: "I kin handle it alone. I'd rather that way."

Lavery moved then. He swung out his leg. The toe of his boot crashed into the lantern, breaking glass and turning it over. Coal oil suddenly flared as it spread out across the floor.

Royce started at him. Lavery drove a knotted fist into Royce's jaw, putting his good shoulder behind the blow. Royce's head snapped back. Lavery started toward the shack door. "Easy, man," Rondo said behind him. "you're a mite hasty."

Lavery halted, the tone of Rondo's voice holding him like the noose of a riata. "What do you mean, Rondo?"

"Just that you'll need a gun. But if you'd waited, we'd of had help."

Lavery didn't stop to put it together, then. He acted from instinct instead of conscious thought. Royce was gathering himself together. He had regained his balance and was pulling at his holster.

Behind him the coal oil flared.

Lavery and Rondo hit Royce together. Royce went down. Lavery twisted the gun from his hand. Outside men must have seen the flames, because there was shouting and running feet. The shed itself had caught fire.

LAVERY CUT away from the burning shed, into the blackness, pausing only momentarily to make sure that Rondo was following him. He was not sure whether any one had seen him,

but it didn't matter just then. Men were running toward the shed and somewhere in the night a mill of cows was pounding the ground and bellowing. Lavery stopped running, waiting until Rondo came up. He asked sharply: "Where's the girl, Rondo? Where's Gennie?"

"In the shelter."

He pointed into the night. Lavery could make out two pinpoints of light.

"I need a pony," he said.

"They're by the cabin. If you..."

Rondo was trying to tell him something. But Lavery had already begun sprinting toward the pinpoints of light. The whole floor of the canyon seemed to have broken into a turmoil. He paid no attention to it. After the hours of confinement, his legs were stiff and unwilling. His whole right side from shoulder to hip was almost paralyzed. The strain of the running reached up his thighs, knotting the muscles, and he had to fight for gasps of air. He wondered if he could make it. Yet he knew he had to.

Looking ahead, he saw that the lights had grown much larger. And then he could make out the vague outline of the building, while the glow from the windows sprayed out over the grass. He slowed his pace and angled to the left, out of the light. He came up to the building at a jog, telling himself he had to figure this out right, because there wasn't going to be another chance for him. Or for Gennie. Because if they got him, Royce had plans all laid.

At first he thought the building was empty. He stood inside the door, eyes blinded by the sudden glare, the gun he had taken from Royce heavy in his left hand. There was no furniture except the bunks along the wall and the rusted stove at one end. Then he noticed the door and he moved over on the balls of his feet and pulled it open. In the dim lamplight that seeped into it, he saw this was a storeroom of sorts. He heard a soft moan. Momentarily he forgot caution and strode inside. It was

Gennie, all right. She was tied to a bunk. His fingers worked rapidly at the cords, unknitting the twisted ends. She had been half suffocated with the rag that had been bound across her mouth.

Helping her to her feet, Lavery felt sick inside. He circled his arm around her, and helped her out into the light. Her hair fell wildly about her face. There were scratches across her cheeks. One sleeve of her shirt had been almost torn away.

She looked at him with clouded eyes. "I tried to get away..." she said heavily.

She was so weak she couldn't stand alone. Together they moved toward the door. But the abrupt clatter of hoofs just outside drove the breath suddenly out of Lavery. He pulled her back and away, up against the wall, and he edged a little way off so that his gun arm was clear.

He heard the hoofs skidding to a halt and then boots thudding on the ground as they approached the cabin. He curled the fingers of his right hand, wanting to see if they would work. There was no sensation in them. So he kept the gun in his left. He could see his knuckles, white and smeared a little with dry blood. He felt every tendon in him drawing tight as he waited there. Time receded into a measureless void. Each footfall strung out over eons. His brain had become too sharp, so that each flicker of the lamp, each small sound like the soft movement of Gennie's breathing, assumed an enormous importance.

JUST OUTSIDE the door, the footsteps halted. A heavy voice said with irritation: "Find out what the devil's up. You could hear this racket as far as Dawling."

That was Hyson's voice, Lavery thought. No telling how many men were with him. But if he came alone, or with ten, it didn't matter. There'd be six cartridges in his gun. He'd use them as best he could. His job was to

get Gennie away. He'd figure things as he went along.

A horse took off into the night. Then Hyson stepped inside. He was alone. Lavery took a step forward. He said in a low voice: "Reach, Hyson."

Hyson swung around, jaw going slack. Lavery held his gun leveled at Hyson's middle. He said: "Gennie, you got to make it yourself, now. I'll come as soon as I can."

He had to keep his eye on Hyson. He heard Gennie begin to move. He heard Hyson's heavy breathing. And then behind him a body falling.

"Gennie."

He felt the anguish rise out of him. "Jim I wish..."

He must have momentarily looked away from Hyson in his concern. Because now Hyson was going for his gun.

Lavery triggered. He felt the recoil run up his arm, and then Hyson jumped toward him. Lavery thumbed back the hammer and fired again. The slug went through Hyson's throat. He went over sideways, spurting blood.

Lavery rocked back on his heels, feeling sick. Outside he heard faintly the dry sharp hacking of guns, the cries of men, the thunder of hoofs as when beef cows stampede. It meant nothing to him. He swung around, bent over and lifted Gennie up. Her body was heavy in his arms. Her eyelids were closed, her breast moving gently, as if she were asleep. He carried her out into the night, finding in himself the strength he needed. Hyson's horse was there, ready saddled, waiting as if planned. But he could have done nothing unless Rondo had appeared out of the night and helped him.

"She'll be all right," Lavery said. "I'll git her home."

Rondo sighed. The gunfire seemed to be dying down. Lavery, in the saddle now with Gennie in front of him, held safely with his left arm, looked down at Rondo. He felt suddenly very weak and tired. And confused. He asked, "Rondo, what's this all about?"

"I been cleaning up the Lazy Y range," Rondo said softly. "Showin' a few rustlers it ain't healthy to run their brands when Rondo's around."

- 8 -



AFTER THE wedding, they had gone out to Lazy Y. Rondo had wanted them to. He asked Mrs. Brant to fix some food, so they could celebrate properly. And now the women were inside the ranch house, getting things ready. Lavery squatted in the grass down near the corral. He looked out over the range, remembering old Brant and the day he had come here. How he wanted to belong. Be part of the family. And now he was. Gennie was his wife. Only it wasn't the same. This was Rondo's ranch, even though he wanted Lavery to work on it, and old Brant wasn't around. But things never are the same. You hope they can be, but they never are, and you have to build on what is, not what you'd like things to be.

A wisp of cloud in the blue sky was already edged with gold from the dying sun. Lavery saw Rondo coming toward him, thin and stoop-shouldered against the horizon. He walked as if he were tired.

"Your shoulder make out all right?" Rondo asked, as he came up, the corners of his mouth smiling. "Maybe you should of put off being hitched so soon. Until you could use both arms good."

"I'll make out," Lavery said.

He thought back to that night. Those things he didn't understand. Rondo had rounded up ranchers from the north, ranchers whose cattle had been rustled. That was what Rondo

had tried to tell him. That before long, these men would be sweeping down on the canyon to right the wrong done them. That he, Rondo, coming from jail, had been able to work into Royce's confidence, get on the inside of Tom Hyson's ring, and so lay down the strategy of the surprise attack that had led to success.

But that was over, now. Hyson and Royce dead, The Deacon and Geiger in the jailhouse. The cattle returned to their owners.

Rondo let himself down on the grass beside Lavery. "I ain't much of a hand at runnin' a cow farm," Rondo said moodily. "I got to count on you to see Lazy Y makes good. You think you can do it?"

Lavery took out a sack of tobacco and rolled himself a smoke. "I kin try, Rondo. But why did you buy the spread, if you feel like that?"

Rondo shrugged. "I wonder," he said.

Then they heard the bell from the ranch house, calling them to chuck, and Lavery tossed away his smoke and looked out again across the range. He felt an assurance growing in him, as if he could tell somehow that he would do all right for Rondo here at Lazy Y.

"Don't keep the womenfolk waitin'," Rondo said casually. "Tell them I'll be up in a few minutes."

"Sure, Rondo. Don't be long."

Lavery started walking up the path toward the ranch house. He was an odd one, Rondo. You had to understand him. But you wouldn't think he would have done time in the jailhouse. It didn't fit.

GENNIE WAS waiting for him at the door. Lavery caught her up briefly in his arms, kissing her lightly. Her eyes shining as he looked into them.

"How's your cookin', Mrs. Lavery?" he asked.

"Come in and see."

He pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. The aroma of boiling cof-

fee mingled with the sweetness of fresh-baked rolls.

"Where's Rondo?" Mrs. Brant asked from the stove.

"Coming. Dish it up."

But Rondo didn't come. When Lavery went looking for him, he found a dirty envelope nailed to the top rail of the corral. In it was the deed to Lazy Y, made out to James Lavery. And a dogeared scrap of paper scribbled in pencil.

"I ain't much of a hand for cows," it said. "Reckon I'll push on. Just save a bunk in case I ever stop by."

He let the paper fall from his fingers. Looking across the range, he could see a distant rider heading into the fading sunset. Lavery turned back, not just sure what he felt, to find that Gennie had come up beside him.

"Gone?"

Lavery nodded. He bent over to pick up the piece of paper. It had fallen with the message side down. On the other side was written in ink: *This will introduce James Lavery Triggers, Special Agent for the Cattlemen's Protective Society.*

It was signed and dated six months earlier. And someone had run a pencilled line through the name and printed in bold capitals "Rondo."

Gennie's hand went to his. It felt warm and understandable. "Is something wrong, Jim?" she asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"There aren't any ghosts, Gennie. It just sometimes seems so."

He crumpled up the paper in his big hand. He figured that was what Rondo would want. "I was thinking," he went on, "Rondo could have been my father. He was about the right age. His first two names were the same as mine."

"You look like him a little."

"It's a funny thing to think," he said slowly. "But it would explain a lot. That's the ghost I was seeing, Gennie. The ghost of the father I never knew."

He glanced out over the range again. There was no longer any sign of the rider. The sun had gone down, leaving only a soft glow on the horizon.

He pressed Gennie's hand gently.

Together they walked back to the ranch house in the gathering twilight.

3 Tophand Novelets



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A SLANT ON JESSE JAMES

Special Feature by CARL BREIHAN



MOST OF THOSE who write, or attempt to write, of the life and times of America's most famous bandit—Jesse Woodson James—can generally be accused of prejudice, in that their writing is, in a vast majority of cases, slanted. I mean by that word "slanted" that they show in their writing that they have pre-judged the principal character, Jesse James.

They show—in fact, make it very evident—that they either favor or disapprove of him. There is only one word for that kind of writing: biased, or prejudicial. In most cases such writing does not present the facts, in the sense that facts are generally defined, but rather the personal idea or opinion of the writer. Reading between the lines, one can detect just where the writer really lies, whether he is for or against the character of whom he is writing. Thus, the so-called account or retelling of any incident, occurrence, circumstance, or happening in the life of the person written about becomes worthless, as to its authenticity or value in research.

First and foremost, Jesse was born under a considerable handicap, in that he was what could almost be called an unwanted child—not in the general way one considers such things, but shortly after the death of another child. Robert James was born July 19, 1845, and died in infancy—a child whom Mrs. James fairly idolized.

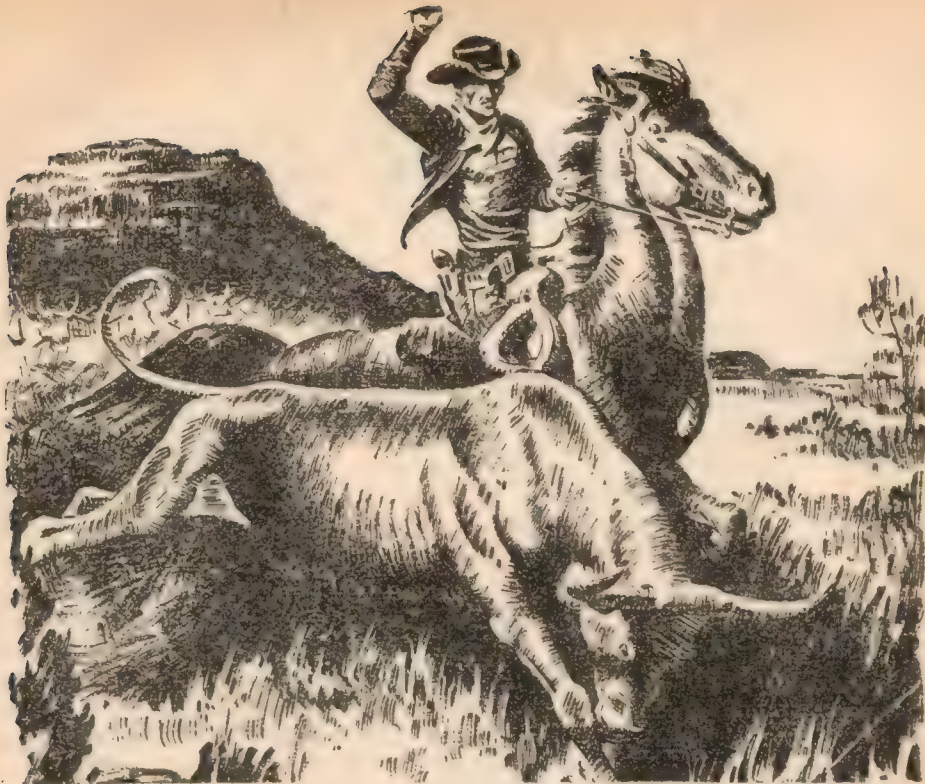
At first, Mrs. James rather resented her third-born, Jesse; it was some time before she could finally reconcile herself to the fact that he should, in a way, take the place of Robert.

Being of a very sensitive and high-strung nature this feeling of his mother towards him was transmitted to Jesse; in his childish way he sensed the fact that something stood between him and his mother. This was later overcome to a certain extent but not altogether; and it did serve to develop in Jesse suspiciousness and resentment. He resented his elder brother and later a sister, Susan; Jesse felt that he wasn't getting a fair break.

IT MADE HIM mean and in some ways, treacherous. He would brood over fancied wrongs, and he never fully trusted anyone. This is shown by the choice of men he picked as members of the gang that was afterwards called the James-Younger gang. Jesse not only picked the men, but, what is more important, he assigned to them special duties—as inside men, street men, or horse holders. One is sometimes led to wonder at some of his choices—for instance, Tucker Bassham, Tom Keene, Bill Ryan, and others, the majority of whom could hardly be classed as intelligent. The reason is self-evident: Jesse chose those kind of men for members of his band simply because he could and did dominate them. They looked upon Jesse, not as Frank James, Cole Younger, and others of the gang looked upon him, but rather as a "big shot." To Frank, to Cole Younger, and probably to others as well, Jesse was just another member of the gang—a bit on the assertive side, and one who generally had his way about how a certain job should be pulled. This wasn't because Jesse's ideas were any better, but rather because the others did not care to dispute the point with him.

From all indications and reports Jesse James had a one-track mind; of that there can be but little doubt.





On The Chisholm Trail

by Edward Garner

On the Chisholm Trail they told the tale
Of Scorpion Pluto Raines,
A wicked guy, with an evil eye,
And a heart of plumb black stains.
He forked a roan, and he rode alone,
And he camped where the western stars
Shone bright on him by a canyon's rim,
Far off from a jail's grim bars.

A parson's son, young Raines was won
To a life of crime when he
Was given the bounce, by all accounts,
By a girl named Eloise Lee.
She spurned his love, and gave the shove
That put the unhappy Raines
On a path of sin, paved with loot and gin,
And studded with rustler's gains.

A stagecoach came, and with eyes aflame
For gold that the stagecoach bore,
Raines drew his gun as he had done
In many a crime before.
The shots rang out, there was some doubt

As to who held the winning hand,
Until Raines fell, as still they tell,
Bound for the far, far land.

Without a sound, upon the ground,
He gasped for the hard-won breath,
But he did not shrink, there on the brink,
From the rendezvous with Death.
With a choking cry for the one to die,
There stepped from the stage a miss,
A girl as rare as she was fair,
Who knelt, and gave Raines a kiss.

Raines' eyes were closed, thought unopposed
To his soul's impending flight
To the land afar, where last roundups are,
And the tally is always right.
But then he saw, with a touch of awe,
The girl on her bended knees—
Raines then got well and wed the belle,
And her name—it was Eloise!

————— ★ —————

HIS CALLING CARD HAD CLAWS ON IT

Special Feature by HAROLD GLUCK



I RECENTLY came across an advertisement for U. S. Savings Bonds with a picture of the old western scout on it. Luther Kelly. It stated that, "Luther Kelly lied about his age and got into the army at 15. They sent him West in 1865, and he stayed. He liked the wilderness. Game abounded. In Trappers' Lake according to accounts, 'trout were so thick, they obscured the bottom.' He learned Sioux, but read Shakespeare and Scott.

One day, he visited General Miles, sending a huge fierce-clawed bear's paw to Miles as his calling card. Miles made him chief scout against the Sioux. By 1885, the country was taming down and Yellowstone Kelly left it. Two decades later, Teddy Roosevelt praised the heroic treasurer of Surigao in the Philippines who saved the town from outlaws. Name: Luther S. Kelly. Yellowstone Kelly's body now rests at Kelly Mountain in Montana."

He was, for my money, one of the best scouts in the West. But how come very few people knew about him? Alas, he didn't get the break that Bill Cody got. When Ned Buntline, alias Colonel E. Z. C. Judson, was introduced by Major Brown to Cody, the greatest bit of publicity was launched upon the American public. The public needed a hero, and the fertile mind and pen of Ned, plus the willingness of Cody, did the rest.

Yellowstone Kelly first met Sitting Bull and his war party on the Mouse River. On that occasion, the scout was with a group of Indians bound for the buffalo grounds to make pemmican.

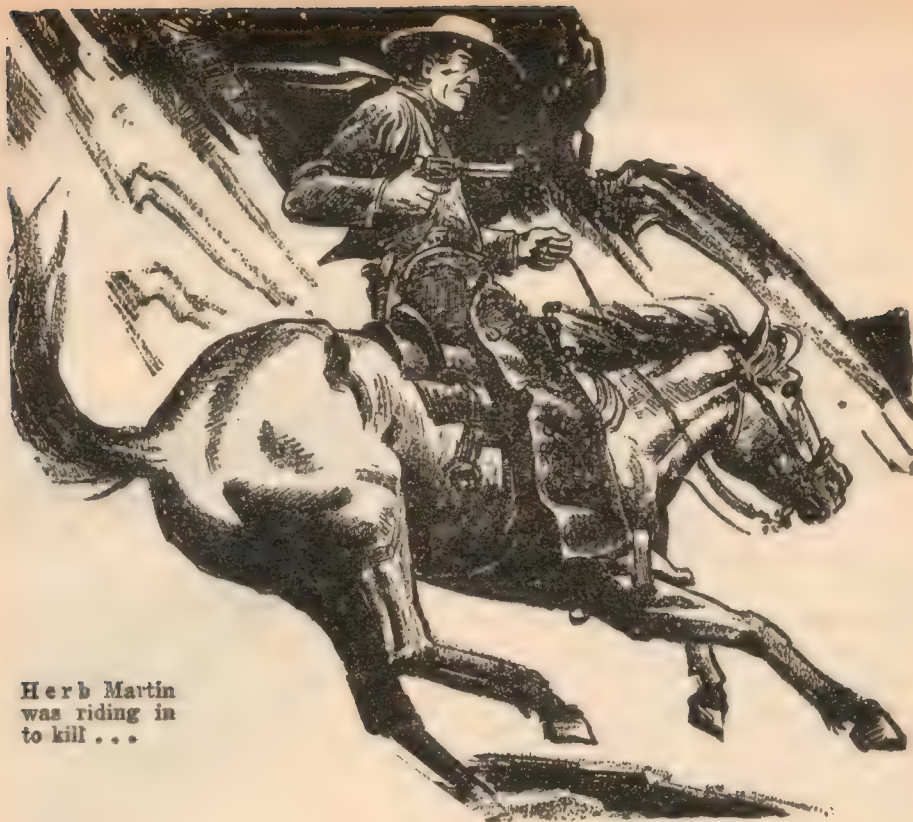
The famous Sitting Bull merely shook hands with Kelly, and that was the end of it. We have an excellent description of how pemmican was made from the observations of Kelly:

"The buffaloes being killed, and scattered over a considerable area of ground, all hands turn in and cut up the meat, which is packed to camp. Here it is cut into great slabs, the thickness of one's finger and hung on long lines of rawhide or lariat to dry in the sun. When thoroughly dry, the meat, much reduced in weight and size, is toasted slightly on coals, then placed on rawhides or stiff canvas and broken up as much as possible with flails very much like those used for threshing wheat.

"The desiccated meat is then placed in rawhide sacks, and the mass is solidified by pouring hot tallow or marrow fat; and the sacks are fastened with rawhide thongs in much the same way that sacks of grain are tied. One pound of this wholesome and concentrated food is equal to about ten pounds of fresh meat. It will keep in good condition one or two weeks. And the Red River people sold tons of it to the trade posts on both sides of the line. Besides conserving great quantities for their own winter use and for sale in the settlements. The desiccated meat, fresh from contact with live coals, is most appetizing and sustaining and when mixed with marrow fat it makes a rich food. A pony will pull from 1000 to 1500 pounds on a cart and the pemmican is usually made at a time of the year when the fur on the buffalo is not in condition for a robe."

Where's the enterprising hot dog stand that is willing to go back to pioneer days and advertize, "Pemmican" on the menu?





Herb Martin
was riding in
to kill . . .

KILLER'S PURSE

A. A. Baker

Herb Martin's gunsmoke feud against the unknown slayers of his father threatened to depopulate the town!

THE JEFFERSON church was a clapboard shack on the dusty waste-lands that stretched toward the trickle of water seeping through the caked mud of the Rio Grande. Men coated in black, with string ties and narrow kerchiefs, stood in groups on the pounded church yard.

They cursed under their breaths at the flies as the body was brought down the three steps. Sunlight struck on the bright nailheads of the raw coffin. The pallbearers were blanketed for a second by the shade of the east wall as they staggered under the weight of Jed Martin's body.

There was a sense of urgency in their measured tread, a growing feeling that these rites had better be finished quick. Burying a neighbor was usually a lingering affair—a chance to gather and exchange recollections of the past, or to talk of the drought.

Women would speak softly of new babies; but today, there were no women or children, no talk among the crowd about the church.

The reason lay in the fact that Jeb Martin's body was heavy with slugs. The bloody bubbles that still stained his stringy mustaches hid the mouth that had cursed his killers. Some of the mourners had heard those curses, even while their rifles still smoked from the ejected jackets of the lethal shells.

Martin's two sons were missing from the burial. Ray, a usually-jovial lad, and his brother Herb. The tight-lipped Herb had lived by the gun, had battled his way deep into the sorties of the grass wars, fence cuttings, and the sheep feuds. He had returned at his father's wish and, for the last several years, remained on the Martin Ranch and let his past die behind him.

A man suddenly lifted the curled lip of his black hat and stared out into the setting sun at two horsemen. He swore softly then dragged the hat down over his eyes and nudged his neighbor. "Here comes hell on roaring hooves!"

"Damn...!" muttered the other man. "This thing should'a been over an' done with."

The pallbearers had halted. They set the casket down, ten feet from the new grave, and stepped back to watch the approach of the two riders. Ray Martin's horse splayed gravel as Ray left the running horse and lit flatly on both feet. Herb reined in and quieted his mount, looking over the ranchers as he edged the horse around until his back was covered by the church wall.

"Who done this?" The tanned cheeks were white under the anger in Ray Martin's voice. "I said—who killed my father?"

"Don't ask *them* ..." the cool words came from the man on the horse. "Them that gunned Pa, ain't goin' to tell *you* they was gutty enough to gun him—especially when it took ten or twelve to—"

"Herb Martin!" The minister strode forward. "Don't fight on church ground. Don't..."



HIS WORDS were lost in the explosion of a barking sixgun. Herb Martin had coiled one denim clad knee over the pommel and his smoking gun blasted gravel around the feet of the startled group. A slug ricocheted off a stone and sang out into the waste. The coffin slid off the round rock, as though the dead man was fighting his way out in order to help his sons in their mission of vengeance.

Several men broke from the crowd and ran. Will Thatcher weaved toward the horses behind the church then

stumbled and fell, rolling into a sprawling heap. He dug an elbow into the dirt, half raised to a sitting position, and pulled his Colt from under the short coat.

Herb watched him calmly, until the muzzle of Thatcher's sixgun seemed ready to explode, then he pulled the trigger and a narrow black hole widened and blood spurted as Thatcher turned and ground his dead face into the dirt.

"Get-out!" Herb Martin's voice grated. "Get out and take that dead varmit's body along. We'll bury Pa." His teeth exposed in a grimace. "Just get the hell away from Pa's coffin!"

"Herb..." The Sheriff stepped forward, his rounded shoulders stiff as he moved out from the silent crowd. "Herb, don't go off half-cocked.

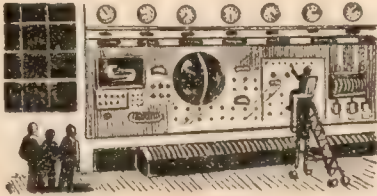
"Get them outa here, Sheriff. Maybe you wasn't party to the killing—but it *happened*—and you done nothing to stop it. If you think your official

job says you got to draw that gun—then draw it or get away from this graveyard." He paused, then added. "We don't know exactly—yet—but we'll find out who all was in on Pa's killing!"

The Sheriff ducked his head, and jerked his thin neck toward the corral. He led the black-coated men around the church. Two of them lifted the dead man sprawled in the dust, and hurried after the others. A wracking sob came from Ray Martin as Herb swung off his horse and over to his brother.

CALLOSOS COUNTY erupted with the churchyard killing. The story was spread that Will Thatcher had been gunned down while he was flat on the ground, with the Preacher pleading for this life. Angry men gathered in the saloons of the cattle towns. It had been a rough, dry season. Water had

[Turn Page]



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became the rescued in*



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Herb had always been a heller, afraid of no man.

disappeared and the Border River continued to dwindle as it eked past the Callosos Plain. A combine of ranchers had dammed off the trickle and thus brought the present killing spree into being. It was Jed Martin's singlehanded raid on the dam that had led to his shooting. Now, with Jeb's sons on the prowl, men who had been in on the murder walked with tight nerves.

A week after Will Thatcher's death, Alex Minor died. The body was found in a hot swale, amid the long-whitened bones of a winter-killed steer. Five empty cartridges told of the fight he had put up. His neck was broken by a slug that had stabbed its way under his lean jaw. The trampled straw, scraped clear of the black rocky ground, told the Sheriff that Minor had died fighting.

"Looks to me like one man did it." Sheriff Hannibal was hunkered down beside the dead man. Slowly, he raised his eyes to his lone deputy. "Looks like he come ridin' hard—this killer—on Minor's trail. Minor outrun him and got into his place. He put up a real fight, but this killer crawled straight forward," he pointed a long finger.

"Then he made a runnin' dive into the swale, firin' sideways."

"You think it was Ray or Herb done it?" The deputy was struggling to hoist Minor's stiffened body onto a skittish pack horse.

"Could'a been Ray but it's more like Herb's kind of gunfightin'." He turned his head nervously. "Why don't you blinder that horse?"

"Won't help, the critter smells blood. Now if the Martins really done this, how'd they know Minor was in on their Pa's killin'?" The deputy had the body over the pack saddle and was looping a short rope under the animal's belly.

"Don't know," mused the sheriff. "Maybe Minor wasn't in on the old man's killin'; that's the trouble. There's a lot of men real worried that Martins'll tie some innocent man into their vengeance set up. Y'know how certain ranchers sort of stick together at roundup, and on social and range meetin's... But that don't mean they'd still hang together on a water-fight killin', see?"

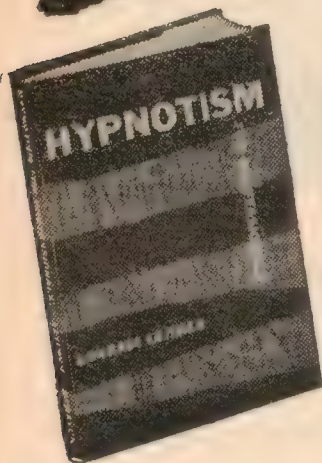
"What's our next move, Sheriff?"

"We'll hold an inquest on this body.

[Turn To Page 80]

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We'll set the record up as killin' over water rights; same as I done on Jeb's body. Then we'll get back to worryin' about the Martin boys."

"It's a funny thing," the deputy opined slowly, "why the old man sent his boys into Mexico with them cows, then tried blastin' out the dam. If it'd been me, I'd of got all the help that was around."

"I suppose it was 'cause Jeb didn't want a water war. Remember, he'd tamed Herb down the last couple of years, and he didn't want the young one to run wild like his brother done. Give a man a taste of fightin' and killin' excitement, and it's hell to shake it. Let's cut this gabbin' and get Minor to Wardville."

THE STREET was hot. A few cottonwoods, brittle as dried pulp, leaned over the back of several double fronted buildings. The shutters were half drawn in the saloon and sweat dried horses switched at the flies tormenting them.

The officers and their burden entered town from the west. The sheriff's eyes were squinted toward a lone rider entering the long street from the east. It was Herb Martin and the sheriff drew rein.

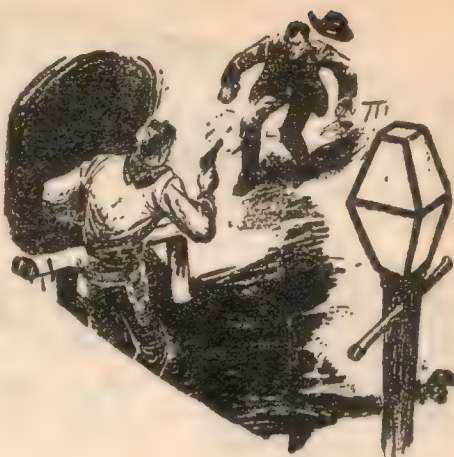
"See you got another of Pa's killers to bury." Herb spat the words out. A few men just emerging from the saloon glared at him.

"Yep, and we got us a killer to catch!" snapped the Sheriff. "Figure maybe it's you or your brother."

"You're just blowin' up a dust storm, Sheriff. I been cleared of that graveyard killin' by a coroner's jury. Everybody seen Thatcher draw his gun; they seen him point it and they seen him pull the trigger."

"I don't mean Thatcher, I mean Minor."

"Is every man dyin' in this country gonna be pinned onto me or Ray?" The tone was caustic. "Next, you'll be sayin' we killed Pa!"



Bitterly, the Sheriff clucked to his horse. His deputy followed and the group of men who had gathered to listen, stared down the street after him. Each man avoided Herb Martin's raking, cold eyes.

"Stanley!" Herb picked out a tall rancher who was moving back toward the saloon. "You gettin' all the water you need?"

"Don't get tough with me, Martin," answered Stanley. "Water rights always go to them highest up on the river. We can pull it down to dry dust if we want! We got cattle to protect; same's the ones ranchin' down farther." The tall man's face was red with anger.

"You're sure a gutless man, Stanley, when you're alone!" Herb Martin said bluntly.

"I ain't pullin' no gun on a mounted man." Stanley watched the others step away from him and he tensed, ready to go for his gun.

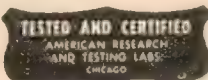
"Then just you wait, I'll unload from this horse." Herb threw a leg over the pommel, keeping his eyes fixed on Stanley. He lit on his toes just as Stanley drew. The gun came out and exploded all in a single movement. The muzzle jumped even as Stanley realized he had pulled the

[Turn To Page 82]

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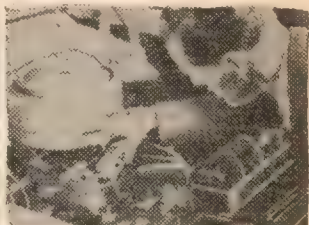
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trigger too fast, without aiming. He turned sideways, hoping to get in another shot before Herb's gun barked.

Stanley heard the crack of his opponents gun and felt the slug hit him hard under the ribs. The bullet burned and his senses dulled as a red glaze appeared behind his eyes.

Herb Martin, still crouching with the smoking sixgun, waited tensely then flipped the cylinder. With steady fingers he scratched out the cartridge and replaced it from the spares on his wide yellow belt. Then he turned and abruptly mounted.

"Now the Sheriff's got another corpse to hold an inquest on. That makes three this week—and one last week. I figure he's due about eight or nine before long." The horse danced as he wheeled between two buildings and trotted out of Wardville.

THE NIGHT was hot, steam hot, but the men had a mesquite fire burning. The small chunky flames sprayed a reflection on the belts and polished shells of the nine men. Horses, a restless black huddle, threw a solid shadow over the hip high bushes as they waited.

"The Sheriff can't do nothin', he's way up a tree." The cold voice belonged to Roger Canter who was pacing up and down as he spoke. "Martin's done his killin' right out in the open. Every one a gunfight, and the other man pulled first..."

"Exceptin' Minor," interrupted a man from the shadows who was wiping his mouth after lowering a whiskey bottle.

"Thatcher, Minor, and Stanley!" snapped Canter. "Where'll it stop?" Minor—now. What we're here for is to figure out a plan to get the Martins before..."

"Yeah," laughed the drinker nervously. That graveyard ain't got much
[Turn To Page 84]

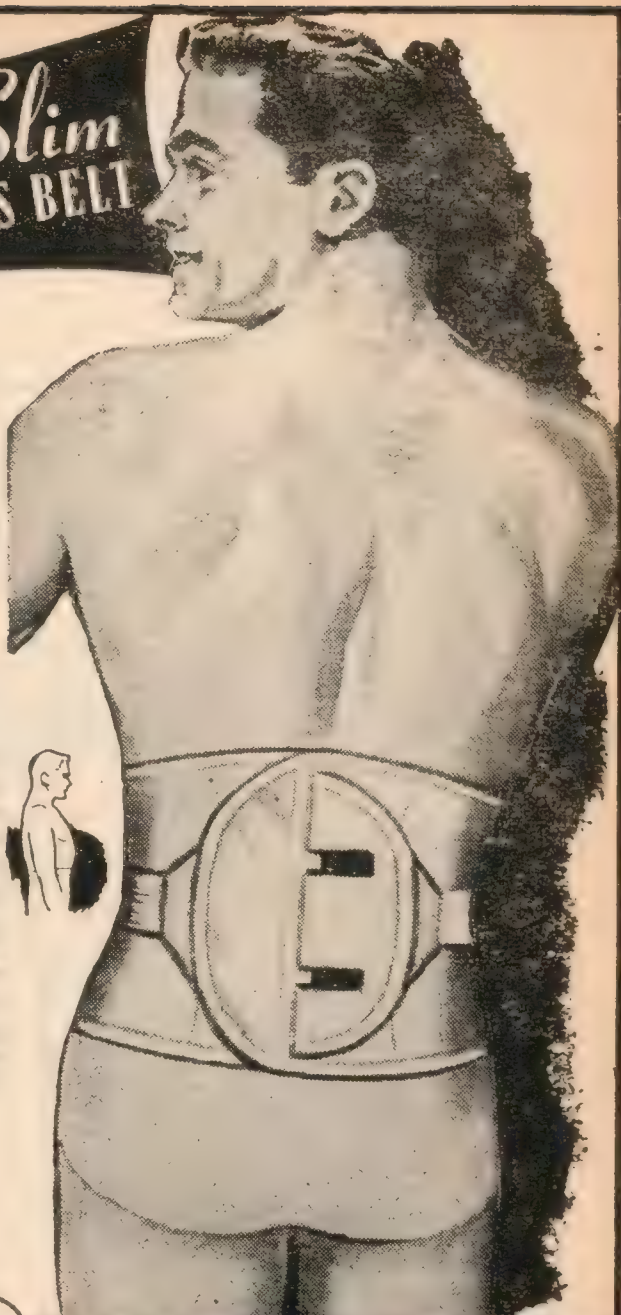
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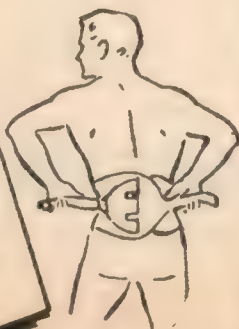
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more room. They'll have to bury us outside the fence."

"Damn it, Dooley!" Canter whirled on the seated man. "Stop your drunken bellowin' and listen to why I called this meetin'. We can't ride up and gun the Martins down. They'd have the Rangers in here quick. The sheriff's hogtied, we all seen that. So, we got to hire us a couple of killers."

A man leaning somberly against a rock, looked up. "Mexican killers? There's a dozen in Matamorra'd do it for a handful of yellabuttons."

"No; no Mexicans. We got to make up a purse, a couple of thousand dollars. Let the word out that's what we'll pay," Canter looked around at the others. "A thousand for each brother. That'd bring the gunfighters

from all over Texas and half of Arizona."

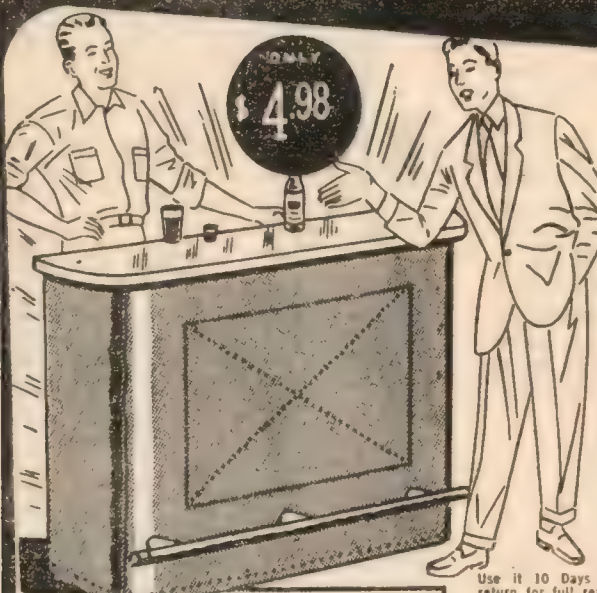
"Should'a thought of this sooner!" bellowed Dooley. "With all twelve men chippin' it, it'd been cheaper. That's about two hundred and fifty apiece. But, count me in. My hide's worth that any day." His light stare turned sullen as he peered around at the disgusted looks turned his way. "Hell, it is to me, anyways!"

"If you're all in on this," continued Canter, "get your cash in to my place as soon as possible. I'll get the word out."

"Then get it out and dam' quick, Canter!" The loud voice brought a mutter of assent from the others. "My wife's pressin' me to sell out an' run."

[Turn To Page 86]

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A BLACK-TOPPED mesa was the Martin's hideout. Herb held the plate of beans expertly as he squatted beside his brother. Ray stared into the grounds on the bottom of his coffee cup. He lifted his eyes and looked out across the blue night sky, letting the roasted coffee still until the stars reflected in the smooth liquid.

"I heard Minor wasn't with Pa's killers, Herb."

"Then why'd he run off?"

"I suspect he didn't recognize me. Mighta figured I was a no-count Mexican bandit comin' up to take them yearlin's he was trailin'."

"But he seen you close while he was firin'?"

"Don't know." Ray's voice was moody. "Anyways, he's been killed, and there might be some of the others wasn't in on Pa's killin'. We just been guessin' who was there."

"What'd ya want to do, Ray? Leave off the fight? Let Pa's killers go free? You think they're lyin' around feelin' sorry for what they done?"

"I'm goin' in and get straightened out..." Ray's voice was low but decisive. "Hannibal's an honest sheriff. He'll see my side and maybe can help clear up about Minor's killin'."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah, Herb, just like that. Simple, but there's been a wrong killin'. Pa wouldn't have wanted that."

"Pa ain't here no more. You got to do your own thinkin'."

"Then I've done it. I'm givin' myself up, and..."

"All right, Ray." Herb Martin stood up and carefully rubbed sand in his bean plate. The tin glistened like a five pointed star. "But," he added slowly, "as long as there's one of Pa's killers left alive, I'm stayin' out here."

The week following Ray Martin's surrender to the Sherriff was quiet. The range killings halted, as though Herb was waiting to see that his brother wouldn't be tried in an at-

[Turn To Page 88]

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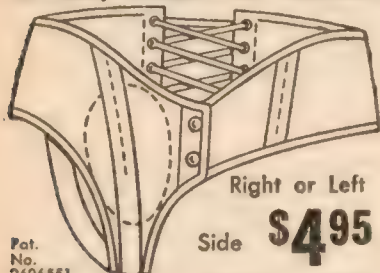
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ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

mosphere of tempers heated by fresh blood.

The circuit judge arrived on the same stage with two large men. Strangers. Sheriff Hannibal greeted the judge with a puzzled frown as he studied the lumbering walk of the extra passengers. Even though new to Callosos country, they headed for the livery stable, mounted out, and disappeared over the first rise south of town.

"Looks like Herb Martin sent for reinforcements." The Sheriff returned to his office, settle in his padded chair and laid a scarred boot across the desk. He studied a broken heel.

"Yeah?" The deputy was interested in this theory.

"Them two from the stage. They remind me of a couple I see on some poster."

"Think they'll spring Ray?" The deputy jerked his head toward the rear cell.

"Why'd they do that? He give himself up. Nope... But I wish to hell we'd get this trial over and Ray Martin off to prison. The undercurrent is gettin' hot. Understand they was a meetin' out to Crouser's Ranch. They're all steamed up about Thatcher's killin' and somehow, that don't make much sense. Thatcher was..." The sentence was never finished.

"*Sheriff!*" A loud voice roared through the narrow walls. "Come out of that jailhouse!"

Hannibal struggled to his feet as the deputy held his hat over the lamp chimney and blew out its light.

"Who's tellin' me to come out of the jail house?" The thin words streaked from Hannibal's throat.

"We're gonna escort Martin outa that jail—one way or the other! Take your choice, Sheriff. You comin' ou9

"No! Now get on your..." Hannibal began.

The rifle that roared from the dark-

[Turn To Page 90]

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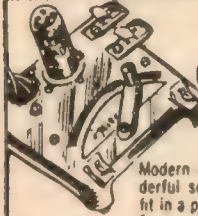
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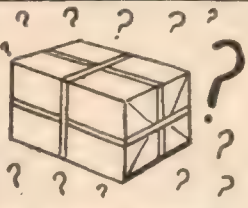
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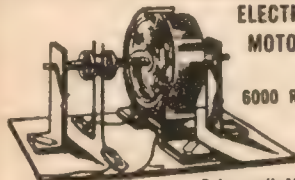


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ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

ness sent a slug through the door above the knob and ripped across the room. The ejector snapped and another slug tore the window pane. The curtain flapped wildly as it raced on its springs.

Sheriff Hannibal crept to the window and laid his gun on the ledge. He heard a weak moan from his deputy. A staccato bark of a sixgun ripped into the rear of the jail.

"Back here!" Ray Martin's voice shouted. "The other's are firin' into my cell! Get me out—or give me a gun!"

THE SHERIFF fired a wild shot into the street, jumped to his feet then, with stunned curses, booted toward the rear. A rifle slug caught his shoulder and he wobbled and crashed against the door jamb. He slid to his knees, clinging to the wall and trying to claw his way to his feet. He heard Ray Martin yelling and managed through his weakness, to slid his colt across the floor toward the cell. Helplessly, the sheriff lay and watched the boy's arm reach through the bars and scrape the gun toward him.

Ray Martin blasted a shot through the narrow bars of the window then huddled close under the sill. Shots smashed into the office as the man in back reloaded and poured more lead into Martin's cell. The sheriff felt his senses clear and he edged his way across the dark floor. He managed to claw the deputy over onto his back and only then realized the man was dead. Sheriff Hannibal reached up to the gun cabinet and dragged down a rifle. The room was a hell-hole of roaring guns, and the powdersmoke half blinded him. But he could see the red fire exploding rhythmically from horseman in front of the building.

He gave a fleeting thought to help hurrying down from the saloons but realized that no one would rush into

[Turn To Page 92]

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ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

a gunfight right off. They would jabber and plan a few minutes. Hannibal felt panic raise in his wounded chest as he caught the first whiff of wood smoke. Either the hot slugs had set something afire or the man in back had put a torch to the building.

"Sheriff!" Ray yelled from the cell.

"I'm out of bullets—can you get this cell open? The back wall is burnin' bad..."

The Sheriff began edging his way toward the rear, dragging the rifle. Smoke made him cough and brought the blood in a spurt from his shoulder, splaying the crimson over his reaching hand. He felt the gun barrel slip from his hand and tried to answer the trapped prisoner. He felt his body going limp. His brain fought for control—then everything blacked out.



HERB MARTIN, a full mile out of town, raced toward the smoke. His face was taut as he leaned forward on the racing, plunging horse. Inaudible words chanted from his throat as he half prayed and half cursed. He listened for the blare of shots above the throb of his animal's hoofs. The drumfire reached him and he slapped the animal with his flat hand. The jail was a torch. The fire had eaten into the shakes of the roof and flames puffed into the still night air. He drew his sixgun and pulled up in front of the jail; leaving the saddle at a shouting run.

[Turn To Page 94]

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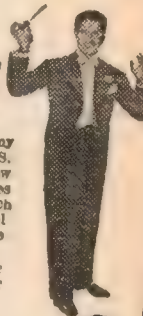
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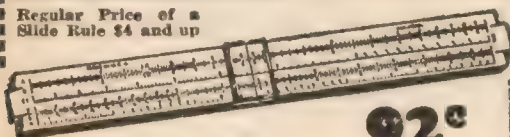
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ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

His sixgun exploded as he yelled. A rifle man turned and; snapped a hip shot from his gun. The bullet screamed past Herb Martin's head and he fired twice. The man toppled as Herb scrambled up the steps and hit the door with his shoulder. The office was filled with smoke. The cells were blazing as he struggled to the back, yelling his brother's name.

"Back here—Herb!" Ray's voice fought panic. "Last cell—the Sheriff's got the key—but he's down somewhere in the office." The statement was broken by harsh coughing.

Herb shouted, "Get back in a corner!" Without waiting, he jambed the muzzle of his sixgun into the lock and



pulled the trigger. He felt the gun barrel explode and the gun jumped out of his hand, leaving his arm numb to the shoulder. He drew back and kicked at the cell door. It gave.

"Get the Sheriff!" gasped Ray as he ran past his brother. "I'll drag out the deputy. That other killer's still out back!"

The brothers dragged the officers into the air and were suddenly surrounded by a crowd rushing from the town.

[Turn To Page 96]

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Herb leaned far over the neck of his animal and snapped a shot into the waist of the fleeing man. His horse crashed against the falling man, and Herb lost his seat and toppled into the dust. He scrambled in a full circle, trying to get his bearings while a slug tore into his upper arm. The gun slipped out of his hand and he crawled to a kneeling position then humped forward, toward the killer. He saw the killer. He saw the Colt rise in the moonlight, the straining finger struggling to press the trigger; then the gun dropped and the man lay still.

A CROWD of black coated men gathered again at the church. The undertaker directed the removal of the deputy's casket from the red plumed hearse and several men carried it to the open grave.

Ray Martin, the burn scar still red

[Turn To Page 98]

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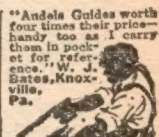


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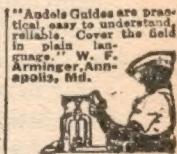


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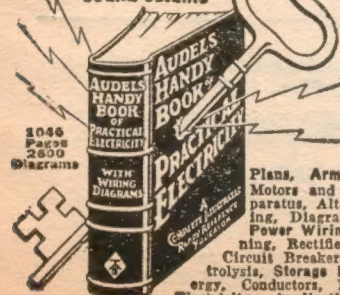
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under a glistening smear of ointment, stood in silence next to the sheriff. A white sling contrasted against Sheriff Hannibal's dangling black coat sleeve.

Herb Martin stood off to one side and watched the burial. First the deputy then, as the group watched stonily, the caskets of the two imported dead gunmen were lowered out of sight. Herb walked over and stood stiffly beside his father's grave; the dirt caked down from the heat of the sun. He moved toward the silent men.

"Now..." Hannibal's voice rose to crusty, "just everybody listen to me. It's time for talkin' sense. I been shot up, burnt out, and generally ignored, long enough!"

He turned steeley eyes on the ranchers. "I know them two," his good hand jumped toward the graves of the ambushers, "was brought in here on account of head money offered for the Martin's killin's. I can't haul you all, in cause my witness is dead but—let me finish!" The mutters died down. "First, the Martins has got to stop killin'. Their Pa died breakin' the law, tryin' to blow up a dam.

"Now..." Hannibal's voice rose to a shout, "I'm goin' to hire another deputy and I'm goin' further. If they's one more gunfight, I'm goin' to kill them that's takin' part! My orders is going to be followed. Shoot to kill—an' you'll be shot at to be killed—by the law of Callosos County!"

"Sheriff?" The stilled men stared at Herb Martin from beneath lowered hat brims. "I think this gun war is over.

Ray and me—we got a ranch to look after."

"You just take care of it..." began the sheriff but was interrupted by the dark-faced Dooley.

"It was all done wrong from the start. Your father, and the others that died..." He seemed to be having trouble expressing himself. "Anyway, we've since learned that Minor was drivin' yearlings offa your ranch, and was killed whilst doin' it. Well, damn it, he shoulda been strung up anyways, and would of—sooner or later. So that clears Ray of his killin'. The others?"

He spread his hands. "Stanley and Thatcher went for their guns and was beat to the draw. That seems to clear Herb." He cast a covert eye over the group. "Them two gunmen that fired the jail... Well—er—guess nobody'll miss them so—can't we settle everything right now?"

A half nod moved the heads of eight men and Dooley brightened. "That dam your father blew up—we ain't gonna rebuild it. The Martins and the rest can have use of what water there's left in Border River."

Sheriff Hannibal nodded. "There ain't a jury panel in the whold Callosos'll convict Ray. Let's all go home. I'll put Ray into Herb's custody—until the trial."

The men drifted out of the group and walked slowly to the horses in the corral behind the church.



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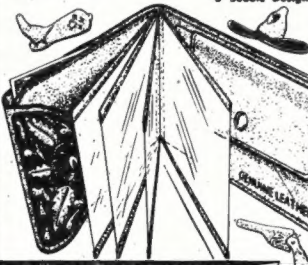
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